University of Alberta

Gratien Gélinas: The Family, Quebec, and Canada

by

Sam Varteniuk

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Abstract

A close reading of three of Gratien Gélinas' texts, *Les Fridolinons '38-'46, Tit-Coq,* and *Hier les enfants dansaient* examined in the light of the social and political climate of Quebec in which they emerged and were first performed. The thesis is an attempt to demonstrate that Gélinas was one of the founders of Canadian dramaturgy by exploring how he connected with his audiences through the use of recognizable characters, and by writing using a dialect of French specific to Quebec. Gélinas' audiences included Quebeckers, Canadians, and Americans; in each case Gélinas would attempt to adapt his style to reflect their particular tastes and experiences, however he was always careful to retain a sense of the place from which these plays had come. Ultimately interested primarily in entertaining, Gélinas would achieve success through a process of reflecting the audience back at themselves. As time passed and the social and political climate became more complex, so too did the path to Gélinas' success in the theatre.

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Introduction

Gratien Gélinas is sometimes called the father of Canadian dramaturgy; the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia refers to him as one of the founders of modern Canadian theatre history. The cornerstone of his career was a character named Fridolin. First a star of a radio series, Fridolin reached the epitome of his popularity through a series of comedy revues that ran from 1938 to 1946. The shows, titled simply *Les Fridolinons ('38, '39, '40* etc.) marked the first time that Quebec audiences saw themselves on stage. Fridolin was a young boy from a slum district in Montreal whose indomitable optimism sustained him through the difficulties of French-Canadian existence, struggling with financial hardship, a government with primarily English-Canadian interests, and a domineering clergy. As such, he embodied the spirit of *survivance* that the French-Canadian people have historically embraced, and did so with an effortless goodwill that made him an inspiration to the people of Quebec. Fridolin as a character was primarily a vehicle for monologues, in which he spoke of troubles, circumstances, and people who were recognizable to his audience. He satirized local politicians, referenced fellow artists, recalled history (often with humorous re-interpretations), and worried over his family. It was mainly in this last category that he struck the most resonant chord, for Quebeckers recognize and can identify with the tightly-knit family unit – as much a source of hardship as of strength.

As a playwright, a performer, and a man, Gratien Gélinas was consumed with the idea and the question of family. Himself the product of a broken one – in a province which

held that institution as the cornerstone of its social structure – Gélinas was immediately faced with the complex, often contradictory definition of family. In his earliest work featuring Fridolin, Gélinas cultivates a sense of familiarity with his audience as he explores the ways in which they are all united. There are recurring themes of the constant difficulties of relating to a world that is so busy, eclectic, and absorbed with its own problems that the desires of a ragamuffin street-rat from the poorest part of Montreal are often forgotten. Yet it is precisely for this reason that audiences found him so endearing, for though it is common for every person to see the world as an uncaring place with little concern for individual hardships, we are all united in our individual experience of hardship. Fridolin was the younger brother with whom everyone could identify; the boy who was so ordinary that he became extraordinary. He was very specific in his time and place – he came from Montreal of the 1930s, a waif the likes of which one could find on any street corner – yet his appeal lay in his universal qualities, his struggles, his loneliness, and his perseverance in the face of what seemed insurmountable adversity. Fridolin was extraordinary in his ability to triumph over any situation, yet it was his very ordinary nature that made the audience believe they too could triumph.

Les Fridolinons were a source of desperately needed comic relief for an entire generation of Quebeckers during the difficult years of World War Two, yet escapism was not at the heart of the revues. Instead they represented a kind of hyper-focus on the people of Quebec, a satiric process of caricaturing the everyday, rendering it as ridiculous as it was recognizable. Gélinas did not make the audience laugh at him so much as at themselves, encouraging a self-awareness that was both amusing and sobering. Gélinas – or, more

specifically, Fridolin, for the two were often confused – was so popular that the people of Quebec virtually demanded that he give them a full-length play. The result of this was *Tit-Coq* (1948), which went on to become an extraordinary success in both French and English Canada – it even played briefly in the United States. The play crystallized many of the conflicts, contradictions, joys, and miseries of what it meant to be a Quebecker, and played an important role in the cultural awakening that was to follow. During the 1960s, the Quiet Revolution would polarize Quebec politically; Gélinas would often be questioned in later years about his stance on the issue of separatism and Quebec nationalism, yet he consistently denied any political intentions for his work. When confronted about the blatantly political themes he treated, his response was to declare that it was simply his intent to capture the interest of as broad an audience as possible, and in order to do that he had to show them things they'd recognize. His third full length play, *Hier les enfants dansaient* (1966), dealt specifically with the Quiet Revolution and was Gélinas' attempt to appeal to a changing, younger audience. Ultimately, however, he was confronted with a nation that had outgrown him. True to form, he adapted to this new audience as any good parent will strive to connect with their children; faced with the inability to tell the story of the younger generation, he turned his considerable talents to the task of training that younger generation to tell their own.

I selected Gélinas' *Fridolinons* revues, *Tit-Coq,* and *Hier les enfants dansaient* for my research as they afforded the clearest examples of Gélinas trying to write about his audience. While his plays *Bousille et les justes* (1959), and *La passion de Narcisse Mondoux* (1986), were certainly also written with the same intent, they seem less

preoccupied than the others with the social and political issues that were at work in the lives of the audience at the time. However both plays exhibit the same characteristics of the works I've chosen to study, representing an artist who is reflecting the audience back at themselves. Ultimately their lack of inclusion in this thesis is due primarily to concerns of space.

Gélinas' theatre was the first to come out of Quebec that could not have been mistaken as having come from any other place. His plays explore themes of domestic difficulty and frustration, the social consequences for an orphaned child with no family, and the difficulty parents experience when trying to understand and communicate with the younger generation. Gélinas put on stage characters, situations, and a particular dialect of French that his audience would immediately recognize and identify with; he became a source of pride for his people, spoke with a voice in which they believed and a language with which they could identify. Perhaps one of the main attractions of Fridolin was the recognizable language he spoke; prior to Gélinas, one was more apt to hear Parisian French spoken in Montreal theatres – even when the playwright came from Montreal. Gélinas spoke the language of Montrealers. He worried their worries, dreamed their dreams, and cursed their curses.

The concept of family was not simply one that Gélinas dealt with thematically in his plays, but an entire philosophy of performance and way of relating to his audience. Gélinas' first objective was to entertain; he discovered that the most effective way of doing this was to show the audience something they would recognize, to reflect an image

of the audience back at themselves. This root of all truly popular theatre was something he stumbled across as a matter of course, the product of hard work, dedication, careful attention to the audience, and dramaturgical perseverance. Yet there was something far simpler and endearing in his approach, as effective in its earnestness as it was naïve in its intent. In many ways, Gélinas was always the young boy trying to unite his separated parents, struggling to reconcile a conflict that he did not always fully comprehend. This was the source of his success as well as his limitation as a playwright; he wanted so badly to please his audience, to appeal and be understandable to as broad a spectrum of humanity as possible, that he failed to recognize the very real differences that separate individuals, families, and nations.

The concept of family is as simple as it is complex. It is one of the first things that a child encounters as conscious develops of the world, a place that is divided and then sub-divided into smaller and smaller groups; countries, cities, neighbourhoods, houses, and finally families, the smallest unit that comes before the individual. And yet family works in the other direction as well, or perhaps it is more appropriate to say that it is stretched in the other direction. Many of us have family in different neighbourhoods, cities, or countries, and when we think of them living in those far off places we feel a sense of familiarity, knowing that, if we ever found ourselves in that far off place, we'd have someone to visit, a place to stay. Employers will sometimes cultivate a sense of family within their employees, using the model to encourage the finer qualities of teamwork and generosity. National leaders may call upon their people as brothers and sisters, invoking a sense of camaraderie beyond the stark reality of financial codependence. Family is

also a concept fraught with contradiction. When nations go to war, soldiers are told to fight for the continued safety of their families, yet those who encourage peace are quick to remind us that the enemy have families as well. The idea of family can be a torment for those without one, while others are crushed by the mountain of demands and expectations issued from – and in the name of – the family. Family can be a call for peace or a call to arms, a reason to cooperate or a prison from which to escape, damnation or salvation.

Gélinas' theatre spans sixty years, a period during which Quebec, Canada, and much of the rest of the world underwent a series of radical transformations with regard to politics, religion, sexuality, and expression. He received many honours, including becoming a member of the Royal Society of Canada in 1958, the *Ordre national du Québec* in 1985, and the Order of Canada in 1989. He also received honorary degrees from more than ten Canadian universities for his achievements in Canadian theatre and film. In recognition of his great contribution to La Francophonie, he was named *Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Pléiade de l'Assemblée internationale des parlementaires de langue française, section du Québec*, in 1991, and *section de Paris*, in 1994.

This thesis represents a close reading of selected Gélinas texts against the socio-cultural background in which they emerged and were realized in performance. While I often refer to the scripts in performance, my performance analysis was limited because of difficulties in accessing archived material. However the overwhelming response to these plays, which is well documented in countless newspaper reviews, magazine articles, and

academic texts is more than an adequate demonstration of the enormously positive way in which Gélinas was received by his audience. This more than anything is the crucial element; the particulars of audience response are not my concern so much as the general sentiment, widely shared by audiences of the time, that Gélinas' theatre represented a momentous cultural event in Quebec – some would even go so far as to say it represented the beginning of Quebec theatre.

I am indebted to Anne-Marie Sicotte, whose books on the life of her grandfather *Gratien Gélinas: La Ferveur et le Doute*, helped me tremendously. Many of the quotes from newspaper reviews contained in this thesis were taken directly from her writings. Translations are mine in the case of all text quoted from Sicotte's biographies. In some cases quotes appear in French that originated in English language newspapers, which Sicotte did not append with the original English quotes. In these cases I have included my own translations back into English, though the result is an unfortunate dual translation. In the cases of *Tit-Coq* and *Hier les enfants dansaient* I have quoted directly from the English texts, as both translations were done with the full cooperation of the author. They therefore represent translations more true to the intentions of the author than I could offer.

Chapter One: Fridolin and the Beginnings of a National Theatre

Gratien Gélinas was born on December 8, 1909 to parents Geneva and Mathias in the village of Saint-Tite, Quebec. Mathias was a saddle-maker, however in the early twentieth century the automobile was replacing the horse-drawn carriage all over North America. Mathias soon found it impossible to provide for his family, and the Gélinas' moved to Montreal, into much more humble dwellings than they'd enjoyed in Saint-Tite. This produced conflict between Gratien's parents; his mother Geneva had come from a wealthy family and was used to a more comfortable lifestyle. It was Geneva's inability to cope with the humble living that Mathias provided that prompted a separation in 1919 – an event that was virtually unheard of in Quebec at the time, and represented a sacrilege in the dominantly Catholic province. The conflict that ensued between Gratien's parents would have a profound affect on him, and would inform much of his work as a writer and performer.

Gratien took it upon himself to do all he could to make his mother and father happy. He keenly felt both his mother's anger and his father's sorrow, and was constantly pulled in separate directions as he tried to be emotionally supportive to both. The Gélinas' marital difficulties were common knowledge in the community; the young Gratien was taunted mercilessly by his peers and snubbed by his elders. Years later, the figure of the bastard, the orphan, and the child of a loveless union would surface again and again in Gratien's writing as he revisited the family difficulties he'd experienced in his youth. Also borne out of these family difficulties was Gélinas' introduction to the role of peacekeeper.

Gratien played a mitigating role in his parents' disputes, a role that he would reprise in his writing and performances; in the same spirit as the little boy who tried to keep his family together, Gélinas tried to draw people of all descriptions into his theatre to see themselves, laugh at themselves, and know themselves as part of a greater family unit.

The peacekeeping skills that Gratien developed during his difficult childhood years would serve him well as a theatre professional. His dramatic strategy was to encourage the audience to see themselves as part of a greater family, and then encourage harmony within that family. The Catholic Church in Quebec also encouraged family values, along with the rest of the sacraments, however a comparison of Gélinas' theatre and the Church reveal very different underlying motives. The Church emphasized family as a sort of protection against the invasive nature of English culture; from the very beginnings of English rule in what would one day become Canada there was a fear among the French that their culture would be erased, that they'd be absorbed into English culture entirely and French-Canadian society would become nothing more than a memory. A proud people determined never to be assimilated, the motto of *survivance* has pervaded the sense of what it means to be French and Catholic in Quebec; the Catholic Church became the representative institution of that doctrine. Gélinas, like the Church, also appealed to a sense of family, using a strategy of familiarization in order to draw in his audience by appealing to their sense of community. However where the Church preached the acceptance of the status quo, Gélinas advocated greater awareness, reminding the people of their history and of the inequities that still existed in French Canada. Gélinas wanted only to present something recognizable; his goal was to expose the ridiculous in the lives

of his audience, to laugh at them and, in so doing, laugh at himself. He could not have anticipated the blowback from this innocent strategy: once awakened to the political oppression under which they laboured, the people of Quebec did start a revolution, albeit a Quiet one. Since that time Quebecois have become more secular, moving away from the institutions that the Church reinforced for so long. For the generation that followed Gélinas, family concerns became secondary to the pursuit of individual freedoms – a substantial irony when we consider that the sanctity of family was a thematic cornerstone of Gélinas' theatre.

Historically, the Catholic Church has had a profound influence in Quebec, exercising considerable control over the daily lives of its people. Often claiming to be the defenders of French culture in Quebec, the Catholic Church was in fact a puppet to English interests, using their influence over the flock to secure their own financial holdings in the province. According to Quebec historian Denis Monière, British conquest and the disintegration of the old ruling class of New France altered Canadian society, assigning the Church an adjutant rank in Quebec. In order to retain some measure of control over its own financial interests, the clergy offered the conquerors its services as an intermediary, palming its own class interests off as the interests of all Canadians (Monière, 60). Land, money, and authority in terms of religion, education, and social institutions such as marriage were all granted to the Catholic Church by the federal and provincial governments. In the separatist viewpoint that grew out of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, the church's philosophy of forgiveness, forbearance, and obedience was little more than a method of keeping the people of Quebec passive and

ignorant, preventing them from taking control of their own financial resources. It was this movement that began to interrogate the status quo in Quebec on three levels: government, religion, and family. These were the primary forces at work, they felt, in the oppression of French-Canadians; these were the realms where ideas needed to be challenged if Quebec was to pull itself out of the dark ages of blind ignorance and obedience.

Tradition and culture were Quebec's lifelines to its identity after the English took control of the North American colonies. The first theatres opened in Montreal in the early 19th century and the fare they offered was primarily in English, though French was not ignored entirely; productions of the works of Molière and Regnard were common fare. Local playwrights did exist, however their work was largely derivative and based on European models. One such example was Joseph Quesnel, a sailor and arms dealer by profession, who was arrested by the British in Nova Scotia and forced to remain in Canada. His work was characterized by the impulse to amuse rather than to edify, a quality that put him into conflict with the clergy – the church refused absolution to anyone who went to his shows. He described his work *Colas et Colinette* as a *comedie-vaudeville*, an opera inspired by French musical models. Hyacinthe Leblanc de Marconnay was also writing in the early 19th century in Quebec. His play *Valentine, ou la Nina canadienne*, written in 1836, is a comic portrayal of life in colonial Quebec. The play transposes Marsollier de Vivetieres's work *Nina, ou la Folle par amour* (1783) to a Canadian setting, and features a character named Jean-Baptiste, the son of a local farmer whose dim-wittedness is surpassed only by his phenomenal good luck. This comic

character's innocent faith and adherence to simple values always somehow keeps him afloat: these are the very same qualities that made Fridolin a success with Montreal audiences. However Marconnay's play presents Jean-Baptiste as a caricature, a comic device designed only to elicit laughter. Marconnay, along with many of Quebec's other early playwrights, was more interested in Quebec as a colonial entity, a product of the empire rather than a nation unto itself with a distinct cultural identity. This was the pervading sense when Gélinas first began performing professionally in the early 1930s – Quebec had plenty of theatre: British theatre, French theatre, ancient Greek and Roman theatre, however it still had none of its own.

Gélinas was the first playwright to earn the enthusiastic support of the people of Quebec, the first to tell a story dramatically that was definitively Canadian, something which could not be mistaken as having come from any other place. The vehicle of his success was a character named Fridolin, who first appeared in 1937 on a radio program called *Le Carrousel de la gaîté*. Gratien wrote, produced, directed, and acted for the show, which ran on station CKAC Montreal; the show changed its name to *Le train de plaisir* in 1939. Fridolin is a small boy, fourteen or fifteen years old, from the working-class district of East Montreal. He is a typical Canadian boy: he wears knee socks, short pants, suspenders that are forever slipping off, and a tri-colour hockey sweater. His hero is Tarzan and he carries his slingshot with him wherever he goes. Fridolin stands out from the crowd of ragamuffins, street urchins, shopkeepers, and housewives by virtue of his disarmingly endearing personality, along with his boundless optimism in the face of adversity. Because of his youthfulness and low social standing he is able to criticize

society from a safe distance: he has no real power to change the system, and so he is non-threatening. His life is beset with hardships both emotional and financial, realities of which Fridolin is fully aware. However his determination to keep trying despite the myriad difficulties of life make him a personification of *survivance,* the popular philosophy – in which French-Canadians pride themselves – of courage, resignation, and survival under adverse circumstances.

Fridolin became so popular in Montreal that rival radio stations began to feature what CKAC would call "false Fridolins", so eager were they to cash in on Gélinas' incredible success. His appeal was universal; everyone from blue-collar workers to politicians would tune in regularly to hear the adventures of the poor street rat. The city of Montreal was utterly won over. Fridolin would often rhapsodize about his unrequited love for the beautiful Azelma, a girl who tormented him endlessly and made his life at once sweet and miserable. His audience became so sympathetic to his plight that gifts began arriving at CKAC for the poor Fridolin that might soothe his heartache; a lady went so far as to send a suit for Fridolin, along with a dress for Azelma, in the hopes that such nice clothes might win the young man a date. It arrived at the station with a letter addressed, "À Fridolin, s.v.p" (Sicotte 1995, 98).

Such was the success of his radio program that Gélinas decided in 1938 to expand his show into a full-length live comedy revue; *Fridolinons '38* opened on March 7 at the Monument National. The Monument National was a grand theatre with seating for 1620. built by the Société Saint-Jean Baptiste near the end of the 19th century with the goal of

creating a shrine for French-Canadian culture. By the late 1930s the theatre found itself in the heart of Montreal's red light district, surrounded by prostitution, gambling, theft, vandalism, and pornography. However the Monument remained an active and prestigious centre for everything from lyric variety shows to opera. It is no doubt precisely this contrast, this thriving artistic environment in the hustle and bustle of a teeming city that attracted Gélinas to the venue; the Monument would be home to the revues until their conclusion in 1946. Gratien was aware that, while his show appealed to rich and poor, his audience-base lay in the working class. The comedy revue was a familiar format to Montreal audiences; there were over a dozen variety and burlesque houses in town, many of which were presented in French by local artists. Live drama had been going strong in Montreal for over 100 years, however the selection was mostly European, and mostly in English. Finding neither their language nor their world on the main stages of the city, and more than a little put off by the high ticket prices, the French working class flocked to the theatre of variety.

Gélinas' revue was instantly a hit. Originally intended to run for only one week, producers quickly decided to add a week to the run when the success of the revue became apparent. *Fridolinons '38* ran for three weeks, giving 25 performances in Montreal before touring to Quebec City, playing to over 30,000 and earning $20,000 at the box office (Sicotte 1995, 104). Critics were effusive; Lucien Godin of *La Patrie*:

> La revue « Fridolinons » marque une date non pas seulement parce qu'elle est extraordinaire, mais parce que la fantaisie y est au service d'une actualité désespérante et que d'aucuns estiment désespérée, que l'imagination est libre et aisée, que les décors et la mise en scène sont au point, enfin parce que Fridolin acteur et auteur possède une personnalité

> unique et surtout qu'il est de chez nous parfois jusqu'à la cruauté.[1] (qtd. in Gélinas, *Les Fridolinades : 1938, 1939, 1940,* 340)

Godin expresses not only approval of the show's aesthetic, but communicates the specific pleasure of seeing a writer/performer that is from Quebec, *de chez nous*. Jean Béraud of *La Presse* expresses a similar sentiment:

> Pour ma part, on me permettra d'avouer que j'éprouve l'un des rares bonheurs de cette vie de critique à voir se développer normalement, s'épanouir librement le plus beau tempérament de comique, (auteur et acteur) qu'à mon sens nous ayons encore vu naître chez nous, celui de Gratien Gélinas.[2] (qtd. in Gélinas, *Les Fridolinades : 1938, 1939, 1940,* 340)

Béraud, like Godin, makes explicit mention of the fact that Gélinas is from Quebec, and one is struck by the overwhelming sense of pride that these critics express in seeing one of their own countrymen achieve success in the theatre. Both also make specific reference to freedom, suggesting a style that has broken free from the influence of colonial cultures and established itself as a unique entity. The enthusiasm with which Fridolin was embraced by the public underscores the desire Quebec felt for a theatre of its own, as though they had been waiting for one such as him to come along.

The success of the Fridolinons revues – which ran every year from 1938 to 1946 with a revival in 1956 – lay in Gélinas' ability to blend pathos with humour. This was achieved primarily through the character of Fridolin, who moved freely through the revues as a

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[1] The "Fridolinons" revue marks an important date not only because it is extraordinary, but because there is fantasy, in the service of a despairing topic, which none could call desperate, there is free and easy imagination, the mis-en-scene and the set are top notch, and finally because Fridolin the actor and author has a singular personality that is specifically of us, to the point of cruelty.

[2] For my part, one will allow me to acknowledge a rare happiness of a critic's life, to see, developing normally and freely, a comic with the most beautiful temperament, (author and actor) that I esteem we have ever seen born from our land, that of Gratien Gélinas.

narrator, monologist, and participant in sketches and scenes. Gélinas knew instinctively that the best way to appeal with his audience was to cultivate a sense of familiarity through recognition. Fridolin was one of the first characters to capture the essence of what it meant to be French-Canadian – he spoke the same language as his audience, struggled with the same problems, dreamed the same dreams, cursed the same curses. Though years later Gélinas would recognize the fundamental appeal of a national, popular theatre, he created the character of Fridolin long before the formulation of his theatrical principles. By a simple process of experimentation, listening carefully to the audience and always sticking close to a belief that theatre's primary goal was to entertain, Gélinas quite instinctively created a national and popular theatre that was bound to appeal to a country that was as yet theatreless (Usmiani, 22).

Fridolin was a Quebec phenomenon. While his first full-length play *Tit-Coq,* discussed in detail in the following chapter, would become a Canada-wide success, drawing record audiences in both French and English centres, Fridolin was popular primarily in Quebec. Gélinas never had political objectives for his plays – it was never his intent to unite Quebec behind a hero with whom it could identify. His success in that regard is incidental to his primary objective: to appeal to as broad an audience as possible.

While it is true that Gélinas was the among the first to be embraced as the personification of what it meant to be a francophone from Quebec, it is also true that, in the early 1930s, the francophones of Quebec were looking for a personification of themselves. In her book *Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United*

States (1997) Sarah Corse describes a process of national and cultural development that is symbiotic. She argues that culture does not occur naturally and automatically out of the development of nations, but rather that they evolve in tandem:

> Traditional theories imply that national literatures exist because nations are naturally different and this difference is naturally reflected in literature . . . [H]owever . . . national literatures exist not because they arise "naturally," but because they are an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations. (Corse, 7)

When Gélinas took the stage and spoke to the people of Montreal in their own French, presenting life as they lived it, he was doing more than just holding up a mirror to the audience: he was telling the audience their own story, often presenting their own history. Gélinas was a well-educated man, having received a classical education from the Collège de Montréal where he had graduated close to the top of his class. He recognized what many of the working-class citizens of Quebec did not: that Quebec did, in fact, have a long and rich history. By 1938 the area had been settled for over 300 years, however in the early part of the 20th century Quebec was criticized repeatedly for its lack of culture. Such notable French critics as Jules Romains and François Hertel frequently held Quebec up for comparison against Paris, and predictably found it wanting. In 1905 the legendary French performer Sarah Bernhardt, who performed in Quebec 9 times between 1880 and 1917, declared on her last visit that Quebec had "no painters, writers, sculptors, or poets . . . you have progressed in 25 years, but backwards " (Hathorn, 109). This lack of culture that Quebec supposedly suffered was a direct result of its youth as a nation – the lack of culture was seen as the effect of a lack of history. Gélinas knew this was not the case; in his sketches he often drew from Quebec's rich resource of stories, legends, historical events, and other folklore. This not only made the sketches familiar to the audience, but

by invoking its past, Gélinas was able to expand, develop, and celebrate Quebec as a place as rich in history and culture as any.

A good example of Gélinas' interest in celebrating Quebec's history is a sketch titled "La légende d'un peuple" (The Legend of a People), which ran as part of *Fridolinons '41*. In it, Fridolin announces his intention to write volume II of Louis Fréchette's masterpiece, from which the sketch takes its name. Explaining that he wants to give the people of 1941 more exposure, Fridolin insists that current day events are every bit as interesting as historical ones, averring, "Oui, mesdames et sieurs, des héros qui méritent qu'on parle d'eux dans les livres, il en existe de nos jours des pleins chars . . . je serais pas surpris qu'il s'en cachât plusieurs dans cette salle elle-même!"[3] (Gélinas, *Les Fridolinades: 1941 et 1942,* 104). This is a brilliant tactic on Gélinas' part, for not only does he invoke the name of Montreal's unofficial poet laureate (a truly remarkable artist and one of the first French-Canadians to achieve international recognition) but he directly encourages his countrymen to stop looking outward for inspiration and direction, urging them instead to focus on their own rich and powerful past. He effectively mythologizes his people's own history, subtly suggesting that Quebec already has a rich cultural tradition and that all its people need do is recognize it.

In another sketch titled "La javi-java des radioromans" (The Pageant of the Radio Serials), Gélinas takes on the story of Aurore, the infamous case of an 11-year-old girl from rural Quebec who had been mistreated to the point of death in 1920 by her father

[3] "Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, there are many heroes of today who deserve to be spoken of in books . . . I would not be surprised if several of them were hidden in this very room!"

and stepmother. The court case that resulted was one of the most highly publicized media events of its time, and became something of a cultural sensation as it revealed a complex ideology underlying the institution of family in Quebec. By 1941 the number of theories surrounding what had actually happened to Aurore were overwhelming, and each theory seemed more outrageous than the last. In the sketch, Fridolin announces that he has asked four popular local writers of radio drama – Valdombre (the alias of Claude-Henri Grignon), Robert Choquette, Eddy Beaudry and Henry Deyglun – to each offer their own theory of what really happened to Aurore. What follows are four very different theories borne out in four very different styles: Grignon presents a pathetic scene of rural meanness; Choquette offers a scandalous sitting room intrigue; Beaudry's is a farce; and Deyglun's theory of Aurore as a Russian spy is taken directly from the realm of theatre of the absurd. Gélinas not only presents the story of Aurore as an example of sensationalism from Quebec's past, he ushers it into the realm of a cultural artefact by satirizing it, at once exposing the fascinating history, the base humanity, and the hilarious folly of his people. In addition, he showcases four popular writers of the time and, in so doing, demonstrates to the audience the broad spectrum of style and talent in their own backyard.

Though Gélinas categorically and continuously denied any political bent to his work, as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three, it takes only a cursory examination of the *Fridolinons* sketches to see that there was a political awareness inherent in them. While Gélinas may have taken care not to enter partisan politics, he repeatedly criticises French-Canadians in Quebec for their political apathy and historical ignorance. In the

sketch "La véritable foundation de Montréal" (The Real Founding of Montreal) Fridolin reads from a history book and discovers that Montreal was not founded by Maisonneuve, as everyone previously thought, but rather by a French theatre troupe who arrived exactly one year before Maisonneuve. He wonders why this information hasn't come out before, and declares, "c'est vrai que les canadiens français ça lit si peu!"[4] Gélinas is gently admonishing the audience, trying to encourage them to learn their own history. By providing a fun, alternate version of history he hopes that they'll go home and compare his version with the real one, if for no other reason than to get all the jokes. Another scene, "En p'tits chars" (In the Streetcar), is set in a crowded Montreal streetcar, the conductor of which is a petty, self-important tyrant. When the people get tired of his officiousness they threaten to sue, write letters to newspapers, do whatever it takes to stop the tyranny of the tramway drivers. The driver stops the car and tells them to get off, that they can wait forever for the next car, and they can keep complaining and waiting and nothing will ever change because the system is as the system is, and furthermore they are French-Canadians and therefore won't do anything really significant to effect change. This is deliberate antagonism on Gélinas' part. He is having fun with a historical and political reality, and what is on the surface a gentle lampooning has a strong undercurrent of condemnation: there is an implication here that the French-Canadian people should do something significant to effect change. The scene ends with everyone but the conductor getting off the tramway to stand in the rain, singing a song of woe about their powerlessness. The conductor – who boasts of his ability to speak English at several points during the scene – has prevailed. This is a fine example of how Gélinas' theatre was inextricably intertwined with politics. It becomes extraordinarily difficult to believe

[4] "It's true that French-Canadians read that little!"

that he didn't have any political intentions for his theatre – either that, or he was profoundly oblivious to the inherently political nature of popular theatre.

While he is merciless in his critique of the French Canadians' lack of historical awareness and political activity, Fridolin always retains a familial relationship with the audience. This is done to soften the blow of his criticisms, however it also reflects the strong emphasis placed on family in Quebec society. In the opening scene from *Fridolinons '39* titled "Le petit cachottier" (The Little Mystery-Maker) we find Fridolin, along with his dog (a mongrel, symbolic of the mixed heritage of Canadians), running a newspaper kiosk on a busy street corner. However Fridolin is not only a newspaper vendor, he is also caretaker of the neighbourhood, making sure everyone is awake and on time for work, getting them their morning papers, etc. He cajoles them out of their early-morning funk, and a feeling of convivial community is conveyed. Gélinas makes frequent use of the qualifier 'petit', which pops up over and over in his writing (most notably in the title of his most famous play *Tit-Coq*). The term continues to be a popular expression in Quebec, where it is used as an expression of affection, however there is a diminutive suggestion as well. The title is not only applied to small people, but to youth (the youngest sibling in a family is often called p'tit well into old age) and to outsiders. In this light, the application of 'petit' becomes a strategy to familiarize and infantilise the subject. The epithet is a loaded signifier: a thing or person is sometimes called small ironically in order to underscore great size or power; calling a large person small is a form of antagonism, especially in a sexual context; a person introduced as 'petit' seems less intimidating, smoothing social interaction; and finally, when a thing is presented as

small it is a form of apology, suggesting it is insufficient or inadequate. When Gélinas applies the epithet to a thing or person he simultaneously welcomes, antagonizes, flatters, and apologizes for it, him, or her. The tactic is extraordinary in its ability to deepen and solidify a relationship that has just begun, and is an excellent tool for generating complicity within an audience.

Gélinas is always careful not to poke fun at the audience without engaging in a healthy dose of self-mockery. In the opening sketch from *Fridolinons 43,* titled "Le troisième front du rire" (The Third Front of Laughter) Fridolin speaks on the phone to a friend of his opinions on how the Allies are fighting the war:

> Il me semble que tout l'argent qu'on dépense à acheter des bombes, des balles, des torpilles et tout le branlebas de combat, on devrait le dépenser à acheter des cadeaux, des bonbons, des bouteilles de scotch, des oranges, et caetera . . . Et puis on devrait les bombarder avec ça. Il me semble que ça coûterait pas plus cher et qu'un moment viendrait où l'ennemi serait assez attendri par toutes nos bontés qu'il dirait : « Non, franchement, arrêtons de nous battre contres eux autres : ils sont trop aimables, ce serait indélicat de leur casser la gueule! »[5] (Gelinas, *Les Fridolinades : 1943 et 1944,* 16-17).

Fridolin's youthful earnestness make him as endearing as he is ridiculous. Though he levies a great deal of criticism against the people of Quebec for being ignorant, he is always sure to include himself among the ignorant. He simultaneously includes himself in the joke while providing some levity on a topic that was a major source of anxiety and tragedy at the time for the people of Quebec: World War Two.

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[5] "It seems to me that we should take all the money we spend on bombs, bullets, torpedoes, and all the affairs of combat and use it instead to buy gifts, candies, bottles of Scotch, oranges, et cetera. . . And then we should bomb the enemy with that. It wouldn't be any more expensive, and eventually a moment would come where the enemy would be softened enough by all our kindness that they would say: 'Let's stop fighting those guys: they're too nice, and it's indelicate to kick their butts!'"

In order to understand the success of the *Fridolinons* revues we must understand the historical time and place in which Fridolin was born. *Les Fridolinons* rose to popularity during the most disaster-filled period of the 20th century. The introduction to the program for *Fridolinons '39* read: "Mussolini wants Tunisia; Hitler, the Ukraine; Daladier, airplanes; Chamberlain, peace. But there is a young man who wants only one thing: to make you forget your troubles: that's Fridolin" (qtd. in Usmiani, 22). This sentiment is very true to the genre of revue: clearly the genre Gélinas embraced. The revue, with its origins in 1920s Berlin, was very popular at the time; the revues of the 1930s and 40s were global in disposition. Gélinas was equally global in his theatre, introducing characters and concerns from all over the planet, however he would always take those international people and events and present them as they affected the lives of Canadians – specifically, the lives of francophones in Quebec. This was done to encourage the audience to stop regarding themselves as a very young, very immature nation, forged by colonial powers far greater than itself and continually swept up as a bit player in international affairs, but rather as a major player in a greater global community. Interlaced with scenes of international matters were sketches from everyday Montreal life, the juxtaposition of global and local working to further reinforce the idea that everyday Quebeckers had a place in the world. The result was an extraordinarily empowering occasion for self-realization at a time when the people needed it the most – a sense of what it meant to be from Quebec while so many of its youth were dying for it.

Fridolin was the quintessential representation of daily French-Canadian existence:

> Fridolin is nothing more or less than the Everyman of the Montreal working class district. He speaks the language of the people; he suffers their frustrations; he curses their curses. Because Fridolin is only a youngster, he can get away with practically anything; with the impudence and the full immunity of the ragamuffin he represents, he voices his candid opinions of authorities large and small . . . The way to the hearts of his public was simply to hold up to them a mirror of their own lives, and to make them cry a little, and laugh a lot, at what they saw. (Usmiani, 13)

In later years Gélinas would attempt to make a distinction between writing with a political agenda and writing in an effort to reflect the everyday lives of the people, however through suffering the same frustrations of the people Fridolin is inexorably drawn into the realm of politics. He was intrinsically politicized in the way that all French-Canadians are, for it is a fundamental part of what it means to be French-Canadian to remember what it means to be French in a world that is controlled socially, politically, and economically by the English. It is likely that Gélinas saw what he did less as a factor of politics and more as a factor of morale. The nation needed its spirits lifted, and Gélinas did that in the best way he knew how: through an honest yet light-hearted presentation of that same existence that so many were trying to make sense of in the context of war and death. Gélinas showed Quebec that it had a history worth knowing, and a nation worth satirizing. His theatre did not incite rebellion; instead, it soothed the anger that threatened to divide the nation and turned frustration into laughter. By demonstrating the absurdity of the people, the politicians, and the system of laws and traditions under which they all lived, Gélinas created a catharsis of recognition and tempers were quelled as people became fascinated with the image of themselves they saw on stage.

Though the success of the *Fridolinons* revues was eclipsed by that of *Tit-Coq,* Gélinas' first full-length play, he was at his best as a writer of sketch comedy. The variety format gave him the latitude to shift from comedy to an ironic, gritty realism without explanation or segue, a fluidity of movement between his two strengths as a writer that he would never manage to achieve in his full-length dramas. He could comment on society, politics, traditions, international affairs, etc. without needing to draw conclusions. Inherent in the form of variety is precisely the shifting fancy, the irresponsible irreverence, and the guileless charm that made Fridolin himself so endearing to the audience – it was precisely his lack of seriousness that accounted for his enormous popularity. His later efforts would be characterized by the need to address issues, to write the play he thought his audience wanted, to essentially 'grow up' as a dramatist. Gélinas would never again find the same harmony between pathos and humour, comedy and tragedy, political satire and wacky shenanigans as he did with his *Fridolinons*.

Chapter Two: Tit-Coq *and the Roots of Canadian Dramaturgy*

In 1949 Gélinas wrote an article for a publication called *Amerique francais* titled "Pour un théatre national et populaire." In it, he talks about the state of his nation's theatre:

> Notre public se voyait-il bien lui-même au théâtre? N'était-ce pas plutôt le portrait d'un autre qu'on lui offrait, même si cet autre était son cousin, même si la peinture était souvent bien faite et l'encadrement du meilleur goût? S'il lui était donné, au théâtre, de se voir lui-même et pas un autre, peut-être rirait-il, ce bon public, peut-être pleurerait-il, les mains posées sur les genoux, et n'aurait-il pas envie de s'en aller. Peut-être. Il restait tout de même à le prouver. Le prouver par des pièces où notre public se verrait lui-même autant que possible. (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 225-6)[6]

When Gélinas wrote this article his play *Tit-Coq* was in the process of taking the province of Quebec by storm. He had recently been given an honorary degree from the University of Montreal and generally declared the father of French-Canadian dramaturgy by the adoring francophone audience in Montreal, so it is not surprising that Gélinas was singing the praises of nationalism and literature in 1949.

Of course, the term 'nationalism' is complex in the Canadian context, for Canada is itself a collection of nations unified under one political system. Nationalism is an ideology which holds that the nation, ethnicity, or national identity is a fundamental unit of human social life, and makes certain political claims based on that belief, above all the claim that the nation is the only legitimate basis for the state, and that each nation is entitled to its own state. To this day, many nations struggle for recognition within the political

[6] Is our public seeing themselves on the stage? Isn't it more a portrait of another that we're offering them, even though this other is a cousin, even though the painting is well-made and presented in the best of taste? If they are given the opportunity, in the theatre, to see themselves and not another, maybe they will laugh, these good people, maybe they will cry, their hands poised on their knees, and they will not be able to take their eyes away. Maybe. It remains to be proven, to be proven by plays where our public can see as much of themselves as possible.

organization that is Canada; in the 1960s Quebec would arrive at a watershed moment when its own nationalists threatened to plunge the country into military conflict, but more will be said on that in the next chapter. Gélinas, however unaustentatious his ambitions, played a key role in establishing the nation of Quebec as a distinct ethnic group within Canada.

Gélinas had strong inclinations toward nationalism prior to writing *Tit-Coq*. In *Fridolinons 1945* Gélinas presented a sketch called "La vie édifiante de Jean-Baptiste Laframboise"; divided into 26 scenes, it was more of a mini-play. The sketch featured a young man who wished to be a poet but, faced with the total lack of support from friends and family and the crushing expectations of society, the poet abandons his dreams of being a writer and resigns himself to a life as a notary. He grows old and dies, and when he goes to heaven he sees all the poems that he was meant to write and laments before God:

> Je n'aurais jamais pensé que ça pût arriver à un Canadien . . . [I]l n'avait pas confiance en moi, le père. Les gens de mon village non plus. En fait, personne n'a eu confiance en moi. Alors ça m'a découragé, à mon tour . . . Voyez-vous, mon Dieu, leur grand malheur, aux gens de chez nous, c'est qu'ils n'ont pas confiance en eux. Il ne peut pas leur venir à l'idée qu'un homme qui serait né à Saint-Agapit pourrait être aussi intelligent qu'un autre qui serait né à Paris, par exemple. (Gélinas, *Les Fridolinades: 1945 et 1946*, 155-6)[7]

The story of a frustrated poet crushed by an ignorant society is semi-autobiographical, for that was precisely the fate Gélinas escaped by refusing to abandon his dream of becoming a performer. There is a tongue-in-cheek quality to the sketch, evident in the name of the

[7] "I never thought such a thing could happen to a Canadian . . . My father never had any confidence in me, nor did the people of my village. No one had confidence in me, and so I lost confidence in myself . . . You see, Lord, the great weakness among my people is that they have no confidence in themselves. They can't conceive of the idea that a man born in Saint-Agapit could be as intelligent as one born in Paris."

poet he selects as the emblem of French-Canadian frustrated potential – Laframboise means 'the raspberry.' Many of Gélinas' early *Fridolinons* sketches contained a patriotism that certainly recognized the shortcomings, the foibles, and the immaturities of Canada as a nation; he was fully prepared to engage in a healthy dose of self-mockery. However the message remains clear: Canadians need to believe in themselves.

Inherent in this sketch is a call to arms to fight social expectations and a cultural inferiority complex, to recognize that Canadians were every bit as likely to be great artists as people from anywhere else. This awareness of the national nature of literature and its importance in the development of culture, along with his later comments about the necessity to show the people a portrait of themselves on the stage, lead me to believe that when Gratien Gélinas set out to write *Tit-Coq*, he did so with the specific intent of writing Quebec's first great play. And this was not simply something he decided on his own; after nine years of highly successful reviews, the people of Quebec were beginning to ask, "when will you write a full length play? A real play *de chez nous*?"

Before entering into an analysis of the text, a few words should be said about it. First, all references to the play in this document are taken directly from the English version of *Tit-Coq*, which was translated by Kenneth Johnstone in 1967. This translation was undertaken with Gélinas' full cooperation, and so represents as accurate a reflection of the playwright's artistic intentions as can be hoped for. Second, there are some minor discrepancies between the French and English versions that I intend to explore – discrepancies that reveal just how focused on his audience Gélinas was. To that end, the

English text is the most appropriate version for myself, as an Anglophone, to address first since the author specifically prepared a text for an Anglophone audience.

During the *Fridolinons* years Gélinas had, through trial, error, and a consummate desire to please the audience, hit on one of the great formulas for theatrical success: show the audience themselves. This was his guiding principle when writing *Tit-Coq,* which is masterful in its use of characters, situations, and conflicts that are particular to Quebec. In the opening scene of the play we find a Padre arguing with a Commanding Officer over a matter of discipline. A pair of soldiers has been fighting in a local bar and now face harsh discipline from their C.O. The scene begins with the C.O. giving in to the Padre's plea for clemency. "You'll agree, Padre, this is not at all regular," the C.O. grumbles, to which the Padre replies, "You ought to thank me: I'm giving you the chance to do a good deed" (Gélinas 1967, 3).

Already we are presented with a considerable number of signs and signifiers that can only be fully understood in a Quebec context. The play opens with a Padre prevailing over a Commanding Officer in a matter of discipline. While this image is somewhat contradictory in terms of military discipline[8], what is more striking are the roles being played out in the scene as they parallel Quebec's socio-political situation. The opening scene of *Tit-Coq* is brilliant in its simplicity, functioning as a metaphor for the situation

[8] Military justice is legendary for its harshness, especially during a time of war, which makes the Commanding Officer's leniency in a matter of discipline unlikely. The Canadian military is empowered to administer its own laws and punishments under the National Defence Act; it is a separate system of justice protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This separate system of justice exists because "breaches of military discipline must be dealt with speedily and, frequently, punished more severely than would be the case if a civilian engaged in such conduct." The Supreme Court of Canada, R. v. Genereux, [1992] 1 S.C.R. 259

of the working-class, French-Canadian citizens of Quebec. It immediately presents the three main social forces at work in Gélinas' own life as a French-Canadian: government, church, and family. Embedded in the interplay of these forces are implicit demonstrations of injustices suffered by French-Canadians. We see the social control that federal government attempts to impose, we see the Catholic Church trying to moderate – but not contradict – that control, and finally we see how the institution of family is used by the church to define social roles and responsibilities.

The scene begins with an argument between the government and the church over a soldier. The Padre appears to be acting to protect Tit-Coq, however the argument he has with the Commanding Officer is nothing more than a ritual, a façade to cover up the real intention: to work together to control the workingman. The CO represents English federal power. Many French-Canadians opposed Canada's involvement in WW2, seeing it as a product of colonial ties to Britain. The Padre represents the Catholic Church in Quebec, an institution that has historically styled itself the defender of the working-class French-Canadian. However the Catholic Church was in full support of the war effort. The Padre quibbles over the details of civil disobedience and military justice while leaving the question of the war itself entirely unaddressed; he becomes simply another force working against francophone self-determination in Canada. Tit-Coq is merely a pawn in a greater game.

Gélinas presents the reality of the French-Canadian situation without delving into the social or political problems of the time – he does not criticize the status quo, he merely

presents it. He carefully avoids the conscription crisis and French-Canadian opposition of the war effort; the nucleus of *Tit-Coq* was a sketch from *Fridolinons '45* titled "The Conscript" however the issue of conscription is notably absent from the play. It would be illuminating to conduct a more in-depth study of audience reception of *Tit-Coq* during its first performances in Montreal vis-à-vis the conscription crisis in French Canada.

Perhaps the only social factor in Quebec with powers equal to those of church and state in terms of its ability to determine behaviour is the family. And sure enough, family (or the lack thereof) is precisely the issue that the Padre and the Commanding Officer are discussing. We discover that Tit-Coq (an affectionate version of Petit Coq, or "Little Rooster," for his quick temper), who is accused of starting the fight, should be excused for his actions because he is not properly socialized. The rationale is that he has simply reacted after being called a bastard, something that cuts the young man deeply as he was raised an orphan by the Grey Nuns. The Commanding Officer endorses the cultural weight of offence that attends the term bastard, reminding the soldier who used it that the term "insulted not only your comrade but his parents. Before hurling such an insult, it's always better to look twice" (Gélinas 1967, 5). The CO communicates that Tit-Coq is wrong for resorting to violence, however the other soldier is equally wrong for using such an offensive term; essentially, violence is understandable when the word 'bastard' is used. By stressing the offensive value of the term 'bastard' the importance of legitimate parenthood in French Catholic Quebec society is underscored. We are given to understand that Tit-Coq reacted with violence because he has never known the love and support of a family; this represents the "extenuating circumstances" that the CO refers to.

The "punishment" that the Padre prevails upon the Commanding Officer to hand down is, accordingly, an attempt to address a social inequity: Tit-Coq is sent home with the other soldier for Christmas so that he can experience a proper family environment. This, it is believed, will soothe the angry child that rages in Tit-Coq's breast. The pursuit of family – along with the legitimacy it will bring – becomes the driving dramatic force of the play.

To be of unknown parentage in the predominantly Catholic Quebec in the early part of the 20th century was tantamount to being a social outcast; Gélinas suffered such treatment when his parents separated during his teenage years. The term 'bastard', as a justification for violence, functions to underscore the importance of Catholic values in Quebec: it is never argued that it is no shameful thing to be an orphan. Rather, it is held as a sort of social sickness, one which must be recognized and given due consideration in all matters of discipline and judgement, even military. The free will of Tit-Coq is never invoked; it is never suggested that he reject all judgement and forage out to carve a new place for himself in the world. Instead he is controlled and defined by the social forces of government, church, and family that surround him.

Tit-Coq opened at the Monument National in Montreal on May 22, 1948 and was hailed an immediate success. "Enfin!" was the declaration of *Radiomonde* on 29 May, 1948, "Montréal aura vu une vraie pièce d'inspiration canadienne et de langue française! Enfin elle aura été témoin d'une véritable manifestation artistique dans le domaine du théâtre local, qu'elle rêve de posséder depuis si longtemps!"[9] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 233). Praise

[9] "Montreal has seen a true piece of Canadian inspiration in the French language! At last it has witnessed an original manifestation of art in the local theatre scene, as it has dreamed of doing for so long!"

ranged from the deeply personal to the internationally momentous: "[Gélinas a] réussi par des moyens tout simples, à m'émouvoir assez pour me faire pleurer. Depuis l'âge de 16 ou 17 ans, alors que j'ai sorti moult fois mon mouchoir, dans le noir d'un cinéma de quartier, ça ne m'étais jamais arrivé!"[10] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 234); "La pièce est une date dans l'histoire du théâtre canadien. Sa création est un événement d'art, tant par sa qualité que par sa présentation scénique"[11] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 234). Though some critics commented on the obvious nervousness of Gélinas during the performance and the weakening of dramatic thrust after the first act, still they found truth in the play's conclusion: "si elle nous fait mal, on voudrait pouvoir se dire 'ça devrait finir autrement,' mais on est bien forcés d'admettre que dans la vie, ça finirait également comme ça"[12] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 235).

Tit-Coq, which was performed 211 times between 1948 and 1950, in multiple productions featuring the same cast (with Gélinas himself always playing the title role – a remarkable testament to his work ethic), became one of the most performed plays in the history of Canadian Theatre. On January 31, 1949 Gélinas was honoured with a Doctorate *honoris causa* from the Université de Montréal. Despite the overwhelming popularity of the play, many critics voiced concerns over its quality. They felt that, while *Tit-Coq* was of merit, Gélinas did not deserve to be honoured by an academic institution while other great local artists went unrecognised. They rejected *Tit-Coq* as the first play

[10] "[Gélinas has], through very simple methods, moved me to tears. Not since I was 16 or 17, crying into my Kleenex at the back of some movie theatre in the quarter, has this happened to me!"
[11] "The play marks an historic moment in Canadian Theatre. This creation is an artistic phenomenon both in quality and execution."
[12] "if it hurts us, and we want to say, 'it should not end this way,' but we are forced to admit that, in life, things do sometimes end this way."

de chez nous with dismissals. Jean Desprez's is typical: "Un doctorat ès lettres, c'est aussi une consécration littéraire. Si c'est ça la littérature française, ce n'est pas la peine d'avoir appris la grammaire et l'orthographe et la syntaxe durant si longtemps sur les bancs d'école."[13] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 244). French critic François Hertel cited the success of *Tit-Coq* as a demonstration of just how depressingly common Canadian culture could be, and that "on peut voire des vaudevilles comme ceux de Fridolin à n'importe quel cabaret parisien"[14] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 244); French journalist Gérard Pelletier wrote "*Tit-Coq* n'est certainement pas une œuvre littéraire"[15] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 244). Critics were fond of speculating on whether the play would be such an extraordinary success were it not performed by Fridolin; Maurice Huot remarked in the June 6, 1948 edition of *La Patrie* that, "the influence of his revues haunts Gélinas. Spectators laugh at the play even at its most tender moments. What is clearly a drama transforms in part to comedy." Audiences were almost invariably swept up in the emotion of the play, but critics tended to find the second act predictable and clichéd; this disparity between popular and critical acclaim would play out over and over in subsequent productions.

Tit-Coq must be understood on two different levels: as one of the first manifestations of a national literature in Quebec and, subsequently, as one of the first manifestations of a national literature in Canada. Both levels are best understood in light of the relationship – and often the conflict – between French and English. In Quebec, the French working

[13] "A doctor of letters is also a consecration of literature. If this is French[-Canadian] literature, then it is clear that it was not worth while to have sat so long on school benches to learn grammar, orthography, and syntax."
[14] "Vaudevilles like those of Fridolin can be found in any Parisien cabaret."
[15] "*Tit-Coq* is certainly not a work of literature."

class struggles against an English bureaucracy; this struggle is paralleled on a national scale, as Quebec, with its French majority, is dominated politically by a largely English Canada. The French ethnicity in Quebec is one of the major aspects differentiating Canada culturally from the United States, which raises an issue of ownership with regard to Quebec culture. Fridolin was chiefly a Quebec phenomenon, however *Tit-Coq* achieved considerable success in translation in English Canada – it even went south of the border as Gélinas attempted to tackle the even larger American audience. While *Tit-Coq* certainly presents a story that can only be found in Canada, it is by no means typical of the Canadian experience. The history of antagonism between French and English Canada has caused Quebec culture to develop as a form of resistance against English influence; to call a play from Quebec 'Canadian' glosses over the complex collection of nations that is Canada.

When *Tit-Coq* was performed in the United States it was seen as representative of Canadian culture, however it only represented a minority within Canada. Gélinas did not consciously undertake to father a national dramaturgy; it was a position he found himself in when his play achieved nation-wide success in both French and English Canada. Gélinas' goals were always to translate the show and perform it for English audiences (with Gélinas continuing to play the lead role). To create a play that would be appealing not only to Quebec but also to English Canada was as much a labour of diplomacy as creativity for Gélinas. While he achieved some success in this regard, his success has much to do with the eagerness of the nation to have a cultural commodity worthy of

export; Canada was hungry for a national dramaturgy, and was perhaps a little more enthusiastic about *Tit-Coq* than its quality as a piece of drama warranted.

The genesis of *Tit-Coq* has much to do with Gélinas' desire to perform on Broadway. He had made several trips to New York between 1944 and 1950 and was overwhelmed by its energy, potential, and glamour – especially the filmmaking industry.[16] The success of the *Fridolinons* revues had caught the attention of American producers, and Gélinas took advantage of the opportunity to fulfil his dream of working in New York.

The translation of *Tit-Coq* was a long, exacting process for the perfectionist Gélinas; the parameters of that perfection went far beyond simple considerations of a faithful and artistic reproduction of a text into another language. Gélinas knew that his greatest strength lay in his ability to speak candidly to his audience in their own vernacular. However, the moment he stepped away from French, he was quite literally no longer speaking his own language. In the creation of *Tit-Coq,* Gélinas' objectives were different than when he was writing the *Fridolinons* revues. He no longer wished to simply win the complicit adoration of his francophone fans but to welcome a new, English audience. Local references diminish and are replaced by explanations. In *Tit-Coq*, Gélinas is not only representing French-Canadian culture but explaining it; he frequently drops hints about Quebec society, presumably for an audience of *étrangers.*

[16] Gélinas was experimenting with film as early as 1940 and made several attempts to incorporate it into his shows, even though the technical and financial challenges of doing so at the time were prohibitive. This passion would continue throughout his career; *Tit-Coq* was made into a film in both French and English, and Gélinas would go on to preside over the Canadian Film Development Corporation (now Telefilm Canada).

It is clear that Gélinas is aware of the cultural divide that separates him from his English audience, particularly with regard to the institution of marriage, in act 1, scene 5 when Germaine warns Marie-Ange, "Getting a divorce is not easy in this province. We're a long way from Hollywood!" (Gélinas 1967, 30). Later in the final scene of the play Jean-Paul exclaims, "But you realize she's married? Married! You know the meaning of that word, around here?" (Gélinas 1967, 75). These explanations and locating statements were surely not necessary for a Quebecois audience, who would have been well aware of the social stigma attached to divorce. In writing *Tit-Coq,* Gélinas was attempting not only to write a Quebec story, but to present and introduce Quebec to the rest of the world, beginning with the United States.

Gélinas' active attempt to introduce French-Canadian culture to a broader audience becomes even more apparent when the French text is compared with the translated English text. In the final scene of the play Jean-Paul and the Padre have intervened in what could have been a disastrous situation; Marie-Ange is on the verge of making the decision to abandon her husband and run off with Tit-Coq. There are conspicuous differences between the French and English texts that demonstrate Gélinas' differing set of concerns for those respective audiences. The English text contains an expository passage on the nature of marriage law in Quebec:

> Tit-Coq: [W]e can still be married! If there's no divorce within your kind of religion, there is outside of it.
>
> Padre: In a case like yours, no!
>
> Tit-Coq: That's to be seen.
>
> Padre: Whether you're a Catholic or not, getting a divorce is not an easy matter in this country. Legally there is only one accepted reason: adultery, irrefutably proved. (Gélinas 1967, 79)

These direct references to Catholicism – especially the almost accusatory "within your kind of religion" – act as cultural signposts. Gélinas felt them necessary in spite of their awkward, expository nature in order to ensure that an English audience would appreciate the tragedy of the (dramatic) situation. No direct references to Catholicism are made in the French text; the imperative of marriage and the social weight it carried would have been implicitly understood by a Quebec audience. In the French text the whole passage is missing; the text goes directly from the Padre's line, "There'll be no question of religion, I repeat" (Gélinas 1967, 79) to " . . . someone else might put up quite well with the life she offers you. But you, never" (Gélinas 1967, 80) which the Padre says in the English version of the play after the expository exchange about the nature of marriage and divorce in Quebec partly excerpted from above. The French text takes Catholicism for granted, while in the English text it seems more clearly critiqued and looked at from a distance. There is the implication here as well that, in English cultures, Catholicism is less powerful, that it could even be changed or circumvented if necessary.

In the French text the entire exchange is missing; Tit-Coq only speaks one line between the Padre's two that are quoted above:

> Non! Parce qu'il existe des tas de ménages qui n'ont pas de jonc dans le doigt, et ils ne braillent pas à fendre l'âme chaque fois qu'on les rencontre dans la rue. (Gélinas 1968, 188)[17]

This response is far more general, and is more of a universal truth. In virtually every culture there is some sort of ritual to seal and sanctify monogamous marriage, yet there are always individuals within that culture who do not practice the ritual, with varying

[17] "No! Because there are heaps of households where there are no rings on any fingers, yet they don't cry out in agony every time you meet them on the street."

degrees of social ramifications. The French text deals with the issue of broken marriage as one that is human and universal, whereas in the English text Gélinas places the situation in a specifically Quebec context in an effort to explain something of his culture to a non-French-Canadian audience. This slows the action and pulls focus from the forbidden love that Tit-Coq and Marie-Ange struggle with, which is where the true dramatic thrust of the scene lies.

The English text not only had passages added to it in order that it might convey itself better to a non-Quebec audience, but it also omits passages from the original French text – omissions which provide insight into how Gélinas was adapting to his audience. In the French text the following passage appears in the last scene, featuring the final words from the Padre before he leaves Tit-Coq and Marie-Ange to decide their fate:

> Oui, ça peut exister, un grand amour et, pour un temps, compenser bien des épreuves. Mais ce n'est pas là le sentiment qu'elle a pour toi, l'amoureuse qui t'a abandonné sans même avoir l'honnêteté de t'écrire sa décision, qui a juré, devant Dieu et devant les hommes, fidélité à un autre pour la vie et qui est prête, maintenant que son mari est loin lui aussi, à te retomber dans les bras. Cette femme-là n'a pas fini d'être faible. (Gelinas 1968, 193)[18]

The padre is being extraordinarily heavy-handed in his condemnation of Marie-Ange, having the audacity to declare her weak and dishonest to her face. The gap between English and French culture begins to emerge when we examine the effect that the Padre's condemnation of Marie-Ange has on his role as a sympathetic character – and again, the difference centres around the Catholic Church in Quebec. In *Tit-Coq* the Padre is the voice of reason; he delivers the difficult truth of the situation and serves as a conscience

[18] "Yes, a great love can exist for a time, even survive many hardships. But love is not the feeling she has for you, she who gave you up without even the honesty to write her decision to you, who swore, in front of God and men, fidelity to another for life and who is now ready, now that her husband is far from her, to fall into your arms. This woman will never cease being weak."

for the two lovers. In order to be a voice of reason that will be listened to, the Padre must walk a fine line between firmness and compassion. For Gélinas, the location of that fine line changed depending on what sort of audience the play was being performed for. In 1940s Catholic Quebec society the clergy had a parental authority over his flock, serving as a constant reminder of a person's duty to God and family. A Padre had the latitude to pass judgement on people –it was in fact his job. However in English Canada and the United States of the 1940s, religion (while it was certainly a prominent and important element of many communities) played a less authoritative role in everyday life. In less strict Protestant sects a spiritual leader who presumed to condemn a woman roundly and openly as weak and dishonest would be seen as an oppressive enemy of self-determination. Had the Padre called Marie-Ange weak and dishonest in the English version of the play – and to an audience for whom the clergy did not have the same authority as in Quebec – it would have represented an insult. An insult to a woman's honour demands that her lover defend her, and the energy of the scene quickly gets pulled away from its real course, which is to explore the hardships of an orphan yearning for legitimacy in a society that will not legitimize him. The scene would instead become a battle of wills between Tit-Coq and the Padre rather than the struggle of one man against society. The major difference is that, in Quebec, a man of the cloth was considered a member of the family, and so could criticize others from the position of privilege that family members are afforded; this is a less common feature of English North American communities, where, as Sarah Corse argues, individual pursuits and proclivities are given greater emphasis:

> The American literary hero flees the social world of women and domesticity to test their strength in the wilderness in a pure meritocracy.

> What makes American literature American is its emphasis on autonomous individuals defined *a priori* to society: the recurring story of a lone individual defining himself in the wilderness . . . What makes Canadian literature Canadian, then, is almost the opposite of American literature – a literary preoccupation with the embedding of individuals in relationships, the concomitant constraint this exercises on individuals, and, above all, the *social* identity of individuals. (Corse, 2)

This is not to say that *Tit-Coq* does not contain a criticism of the Catholic faith as practised in Quebec, and that Gélinas began his play from a perspective of social criticism; he could not have chosen two topics more contentious in Quebec society than religion and WWII. However Gélinas repeatedly pulls back from political issues by watering them down, forcing them so far into the background that all we are left with is a love story. And love stories that don't end happily are a hard sell.

Gélinas' tendency to pull back from contentious political issues is evident even in the first, French version of the play, particularly in the case of the Padre. A sympathetic character, the Padre is also the bearer of the heaviest news of the play; it is he, as a representative of the Catholic Church, who stands between the lovers and prevents their union. Typically the act of interfering in a matter of love would make him an antagonist, as is anyone or anything who stands between a man and a woman's romance. However, Gélinas made sure the Padre was a sympathetic character because he did not want the church to take offence. For their part, the Church did not; in the June 8, 1948 edition of *L'Action catholique* Lois-Philippe Roy wrote of *Tit-Coq,* "Si l'expression est parfois osée, hardie, même trop suggestive ici et là, la pièce demeure moralisatrice dans son déroulement et ses conclusions"[19] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 236). Gélinas knew exactly

[19] "If the sentiments expressed are occasionally daring, bold, even too suggestive here and there, all things considered the play is moral in its development and conclusion."

where the line was – so much so that he knew he had to draw it a little further back for English audiences, and so the Padre, who could invoke guilt and pass judgement more freely in a Quebec context, had to be muted so as not to court the indignation of the more individualistic American audience.

Gélinas similarly backed away from the issue of conscription because he knew he was likely to lose his English-speaking Canadian audience if he didn't. There are few issues more incendiary in Quebec than conscription; in both world wars it was a major point of national division. *Tit-Coq* began its life on the stage as a short scene in *Fridolinons '45* called "Le depart du conscrit" (The Conscript Departs), reprised the following year with the much more developed "Le retour du conscrit" (The Conscript Returns). In these scenes conscription is not encountered as a political issue so much as it is a factor in the life of the main character – beyond that, there is no mention of it as an issue, nor does Gélinas offer any social or political analysis of the conscription crisis. This is characteristic of Gélinas' muted social criticism; often mentioning politically contentious issues, even going so far as to suggest his sympathy toward the popular, public opinion, Gélinas would always stop short of committing himself to one side of the argument. Fridolin was always affectionate in his criticism, gently lampooning the government the way a child adorably complains about having to do chores. This was because his goal was not to criticize the ruling class, but to gain complicity with his local audience. In order to do so he had to deal with political issues, however he was extraordinary in his ability to distance himself though humour and metaphor, using the safe distance where

Fridolin spoke from as a lower-class ragamuffin to blunt social commentary to the point where it was funny and therefore inoffensive to the ruling class.

By titling his sketch "Le retour du conscrit", Gélinas introduced an issue that resonated with the lower classes. He did not need to dig into the ramifications of conscription for the hardship inherent in the situation would be all too familiar to the audience; a simple invocation of the issue was sufficient. Gélinas simultaneously appeals to the lower classes and avoids offending the ruling class by refraining to enter into a political debate over conscription. In fact, the ruling class would appreciate the forthright manner in which the issue was introduced, perhaps even seeing it as insight into the struggles of the lower classes and an excellent demonstration of free speech and democracy. *Les Fridolinons* stopped short of political criticism, indicating a point of conflict within society but never interrogating or challenging it. Fridolin, along with many of the other characters played by Gélinas, reacted to prejudice, injustice, and inequality as a simple and unavoidable condition of reality; he consistently placed himself beneath the conflict, a dutiful pawn in a larger game, doing his best amid the forces that shaped his reality. Fridolin was an attempt to demonstrate how to find the silver lining in any cloud, his irrepressible charm and optimism a perpetual tonic to the surrounding hardships of French-Canadian life, along with the added gloom of war. Fridolin accepted the status quo; he never challenged it.

The English version of the play (which was re-titled *Ti-Coq* for English audiences) opened at the Théâtre Gesu in Montreal on May 15, 1950; productions were booked in

both Toronto and Chicago for January of 1951 (Gélinas was a cautious man and wanted to test the play on several Anglophone audiences), with the Broadway opening taking place the following month. After the initial English run in Montreal, Gélinas took several more months to refine and rework the play, which ran again for eight more weeks at the Théâtre Gesu in November and December of 1950 before moving on to Ontario.

Excitement over the play reached Ontario before the play itself did; *Ti-Coq* was sold out in Toronto before it even opened, where it was once again hailed as a sensation and a proud first for Canadian theatre. The review of the play ran on page one of the January 12, 1951 edition of *The Globe & Mail*; never before had a theatrical event received such prominence. The critic, Herbert Whittaker, was full of praise, claiming that the play kept its intensity right to the finish and that Gélinas was a "comédien extraordinaire" (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 273). *The Ensign* added, "Jamais auparavant dans l'histoire théâtrale du Canada, les Canadiens ont-ils été aussi fiers d'être Canadiens. *Ti-Coq* a volé le cœur des Torontois"[20] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 274). Hyperbole abounded, yet there was the overwhelming sense that, beyond the accolades of a theatrical success, this play should be given a send off as it headed south of the border. Whittaker was the most enthusiastic in articulating this sentiment: "C'est devant les lumières crues, les grands noms et les goûts changeants de la métropole américaine que Gélinas deviendra vraiment le champion du Canada. Le petit comédien sera un chevalier vêtu d'une armure clinquante transportant l'oriflamme du théâtre canadien où elle n'a jamais été auparavant. M. Gélinas transporte non seulement notre fierté nationale, mais les rêves de toute une

[20] "Never before in the theatrical history of Canada have Canadians been so proud to be Canadians. *Ti-Coq* has stolen the hearts of Torontonians."

jeunesse"[21] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 275). It is difficult to imagine the weight of such responsibility. It is also interesting to note the critic's role in turning the play into a Canadian symbol, especially important to a nation where symbols were so wanting (in 1950 Canada still did not have a flag). Whittaker's enthusiasm was characteristic of Canadian audiences, and demonstrates how response to the play took on an almost patriotic character.

However critical sentiment was not unanimously positive. After seeing a performance of *Ti-Coq* in Toronto and hearing that Gélinas' ultimate hope was to take the show to Broadway, Nathan Cohen of *The Critic* averred that it was a shame that the importance of *Ti-Coq* for Canadians would be reduced to the play's reception on Broadway: "Nous n'avons pas besion d'un théâtre qui se plie aux standards américains, mais d'un théâtre fait par et pour les Canadiens"[22] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 275). While Gélinas continued to be well received in Canada after his disappointment on Broadway, the focus on success *in America* as the ultimate success has lived on: many of Canada's finest artists travel south in order to find recognition.

Ti-Coq opened in Chicago in January of 1951 to mixed reviews. Critics felt that the piece was domestic, similar to a radio drama or a 'B' movie. Claudia Cassidy of the *Tribune* felt that the play had merit, however was a bit obvious and suffered from an over-use of theatrical conventions. The *Sun Times* reported that, while the play was an

[21] "It is in front of the bright lights, the big names and the shifting fancies of the American metropolis that Gélinas will truly become the champion of Canada. The little comedian is a knight in shining armour, wearing the banner of a Canadian theatre the likes of which we have never seen before. Mr. Gélinas carries with him not only our national pride, but the dreams of an entire young generation."
[22] "We don't need a play that bends to American standards, but a play made for and by Canadians."

excellent vehicle for Gélinas' talents, the script itself was weak; the climax came too soon, and it was difficult to understand why Marie-Ange let go of a man like Tit-Coq for a coward that is never even seen (Sicotte 1995, 278). These reviews sent Gratien into a deep depression, however as the run progressed the audiences themselves began to respond positively. Attendance began to improve and feedback was generally quite good. Gélinas, unable to resist his desire to know what the audience was thinking, developed the habit of hiding in a corner of the lobby to watch the ticket sales prior to a show (Sicotte 1995, 279). He would even occasionally venture to ask a patron why they'd bought the ticket, and what they had heard about the play. The response was almost invariably enthusiastic and positive. *Ti-Coq* was showing every sign of earning itself a long and well-attended run in Chicago. It played to over 20,000 people in 21 performances: approximately 1,000 per show, which is nothing short of astounding. Whether or not the play would have continued to play to such large houses will never be known: when word arrived that a theatre on Broadway, the Broadhurst, had suddenly become available due to an unexpected cancellation, the production was hastily packed up and moved to New York before it could turn a profit.

On Friday, February 8, 1951 *Ti-Coq* opened at the Broadhurst theatre in New York City. It played for three performances before being cancelled the very next day. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* found the first act seductive, however he felt the second was faded and clichéd, the characters and the play failing to deliver on the promises made in the first act. The *Herald Tribune* reported that while some scenes bespoke profound sentiment and evinced a real understanding of human emotion, a disorganized and

excessively complex plot nullified this. The *World Telegram & Sun* applauded the humanity of the first act, however found the piece became routine and boring after Marie-Ange's family began pressuring her to give up Tit-Coq.[23] The *Daily News* was the most unkind: "Gélinas ressemble à Katherine Hepburn aux premiers temps de se carrière . . . elle agitait si violemment la tête que celle-ci se détachait presque de son cou. Fridolin, comme acteur, est le plus vorace fumeur de cigarettes depuis Maurice Chevalier"[24] (qtd. in Sicotte 1995, 281-2). This failure was an acute source of pain for Gélinas, who returned to Canada in a state of total despair.

Why was *Tit-Coq* so poorly received south of the border? The answer lies partly in reasons alluded to above – the cultural phenomenon of *Tit-Coq* vis-à-vis Quebec's eagerness to exhibit a national playwright, along with Canada's need and eagerness to have totemic national texts, gave the play a distinction in Canada that may not have been equal to its quality as a piece of drama. Perhaps the play was never given enough of a chance – it was doing quite well in Chicago, and closed down too quickly in New York for word-of-mouth to spread. The American critics were much more critical of the play. To understand the reasons for their negative responses we must turn away from the similarities between Canada and the US and focus on their cultural differences.

In Robin Matthews' book *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* colonies are described as, "places that are *done to* rather than doing or doing to"(Matthews, 1). He identifies Canada as having, so far, a three-part history of colonialism, first as a French

[23] All quoted in Sicotte 1995, 281.

[24] "Gélinas reminds us of a young Katherine Hepburn, moving his head about so violently that it seems it will detach from his neck. As an actor, Fridolin is the most voracious smoker of cigarettes since Maurice Chevalier."

colony, then as a British colony, and now as an economic colony of the USA. Canadian literature has traditionally focused on the imperial/colonial relation in an attempt to deal with questions of community, society, and the choices people have with regard to the forces that govern them. Even when Canadian literature does not treat the subject directly, the imperial/colonial relationship remains a dominant force in how the Canadian writer makes sense of his or her world. While Matthews identifies this as the focus of English Canadian Literature, his observations can also be applied to French Canada, where a focus on culture and community was doubly important in response to English influence from both America and English Canada.

Perhaps Americans were simply not ready for a Canadian story; perhaps they were unwilling to accept a hero who did not get the girl in the end. There were rumours that the closure of *Ti-Coq* had more to do with disgruntled American producers, who were irritated at Gélinas for holding on to so much of the production (Gélinas was receiving almost 40% of the box office), than it had to do with the actual quality of the show; similar to Chicago, there were reports that the New York audience seemed to be enjoying the play, and were left at the end in a state of profound, silent appreciation (Sicotte 1995, 280). Reports such as these have come from actors in the show and Gélinas' friends and family, making them difficult to qualify, quantify, or hold up as any sort of definitive comment on the reception of the show.

What Gélinas failed to realize was that the issues of conscription (federal oppression) and Catholicism (religious – regional – oppression) were the very qualities that made his play

quintessentially Canadian, and that by pulling back on them he made the forces at work in his characters' lives indistinguishable except to an audience who was already familiar with them. The play's tendency to exposit in an attempt to explain the particulars of Quebec society blunted the dramatic thrust of the love story between Tit-Coq and Marie-Ange. The political themes were lost to subtlety, the love theme lost to exposition, and to the Americans the play was little more than a romance that did not end happily.

Gélinas eventually became aware of the powder keg of socio-political awareness and came to see it for the fertile dramatic ground that it was; he would try, unsuccessfully, to sow his seed in it with the frankly political *Hiers les enfants dansaient* in 1966. However he was ultimately unable to bring himself to take a side in the separatist argument, and demonstrated this by trying to argue both, as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. Further, Gélinas seemed unable to determine which audience he would court most directly. *Tit-Coq* is a veritable road map for foreigners on the particulars of French Canadian culture. However in his translation of *Tit-Coq* he opted for a style that, while functional enough to tell the story in English, attempted to preserve the cadence, structure, and colloquial nuance of French as it was spoken in Montreal. In the end this only served to create a greater distance between the play and the American audience, who were already at pains to come to terms with the unfamiliar social dynamics of *Tit-Coq*.

In the short term, Gélinas was extraordinarily successful writing the first great Canadian play[25]. *Tit-Coq* was received with triumph in Quebec and greeted with great enthusiasm in Ontario, however it met with failure on Broadway. It was touted as Canada's first great play, however most Anglophone Canadians today have never heard of Gratien Gélinas, though he remains a cultural icon in Quebec.

Tit-Coq is a relatively cogent and well-made play, with brisk action and clear motivation. It addressed a fundamental need that Canada, and specifically Quebec, had at the time: to define itself as a nation through art and to champion a playwright in the international arena. The play is remarkable in its portrayal of everyday life in Quebec, however the weight of producing the first play *de chez nous,* the pressure of all eyes on him as he attempted to accomplish the hitherto unknown, and the imperative he faced to produce a theatre that was from Canada and that could not be mistaken for theatre from anywhere else was simply too much for Gélinas; *Tit-Coq*, while admired and credited by drama enthusiasts and scholars, remains a well-loved classic in Quebec, but it is scarcely heard of in the rest of Canada and is practically non-existent to the rest of the world. Gélinas became overwhelmed with the idea that he was presenting a play that would bridge the cultural gap between French and English, creating an overarching and definitive dramatic expression of Canada. Ultimately this resulted in something of an artificial quality to the play: the very idea that Canada can be easily summarized and presented is artificial.

[25] *Tit-Coq*'s opening run of 11 performances played to a 100% capacity audience, and netted over $23,000. Between 1948 and 1951 the play was performed 373 times in French and English for over 340,000 people, netting $645,000.

Perhaps the greatest proof of *Tit-Coq's* failure to become the one of the first Canadian plays was the speed and conviction with which the people declared it a success. Great plays are seldom immediately hailed as such; almost every work that enters into the cannon is first greeted with controversy. It is interesting to note that the play which ultimately did become Quebec's first internationally successful play, Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs*, set off a storm of controversy when it was first produced, and it was precisely that controversy (along with the fact that, of course, it is a well-made piece of theatre) that earned it international attention.

Chapter Three – Hier les enfants dansaient *and the Quiet Revolution*

The Quiet Revolution, which took place in Quebec in the first half of the 1960s, was christened for its relative lack of violence. However in 1965 Thomas Sloan reflected that the adjective might have been overworked in describing it: "It is a lusty, brawling, enthusiastic and occasionally angry forward movement that often disagrees within itself" (Sloan, x-xi). The Quiet Revolution turned French-Canadians into Quebecois. It encouraged them to look beyond their own borders for inspiration, heroes, political ideas, and to recognize their place in a broader international community. It followed an era known in Quebec as "duplessisme", from the name of Maurice Duplessis, Premiere of Quebec from 1936-1939 and 1944-1959. Under Duplessis the province was characterized by traditionalism, and conservatism. Many felt Duplessis' regime an anachronism, that he was corrupt, that he sold the resources of the province to the highest bidder, that he was a "negro-king"[26], and that he disregarded human rights completely; his years in power are sometimes described as "la Grande Noirceur" (the Great Darkness).

The Quiet Revolution sought to abandon the institutions of the past. The principle of *survivance* no longer fit the social and political aspirations of the Quebecois:

[26] A title, as stinging as it is unfair, used by journalist André Laurendeau in describing Duplessis. The term comes from the practice of British colonizers to accommodate themselves with local customs and rulers as long as these petty rulers recognised the superior authority of the imperial power and protected its economic interests. To maintain traditional rulers was useful; the local people were used to them and obeyed them. The Negro-king could be used to carry out the policies that the natives might have resented if they had come from the colonizers.

> . . . the motto *Je me souviens* is a myth, in the sense of having helped provide a sentiment of unity and continuity to a people that needed such sentiment if it was to endure. But perhaps in the middle age of the twentieth century such a slogan is no longer valid – not because it has failed but for exactly the opposite reason. It has succeeded. The battle for sheer survival has been won. The goal now is the expansion of French culture, either on its own or as an integral portion of the character and heritage of Canada. (Sloan, vi-viii)

Characters like Fridolin and Tit-Coq opened the door for more frank discussions about life in Quebec; by simply presenting society in all its reality, Gélinas effectively introduced society as a topic for public dialogue. In many ways Gélinas helped plant the seeds for the Quiet Revolution. His theatre helped Quebec to define itself; his social satire crystallized attitudes toward the church and the state. When faced with the political turmoil that gripped his province in the 1960s Gélinas attempted to once again guide his people through a difficult time as he had done with the *Fridolinades* during WWII. However appealing to the younger generation was more difficult and complex than first anticipated. Gratien was himself a product of the very traditional values and ideology that the Quiet Revolution – a movement which came to a violent head in 1963 with the mailbox bombings carried out by the separatist Front de Libération du Québec – sought to defeat in Quebec. With the writing of his third play, *Hier les enfants dansaient,* Gélinas would try to harness the revolutionary energy of the 1960s, however the attempt would only serve to demonstrate how much Quebec had changed since Gélinas' youth.

Premiering in 1966 at the Comédie-Canadienne in Montreal, *Hier les enfants dansaient* features Pierre Gravel, a prominent Montreal lawyer and candidate for Parliament on the Liberal ticket after the sudden death of the Minister of Justice. From a dramaturgical perspective the play is impassioned and complex: the plot is occasionally overemotional, and the oratory quality of the dialogue requires very good actors to deliver it. As Pierre

reels from the shock of being offered a cabinet position and scrambles to bring his family together for their consultation he learns that his eldest son André is at the heart of a terrorist campaign to destroy a symbol of English imperialism every day until the election. The image is one of a deeply divided house where father and son, alike in every way save for their political ideals, cannot find common ground; this image is also a powerful symbol for Canada itself, and would have been a scenario all-too-real for a 1966 audience.

Hier les enfants dansaient was not written years after the Quiet Revolution, with the objectivity that only distance brings, but in the midst of it, dealing directly with very current, very sensitive issues that were still in foment. Many people in Quebec were convinced that change was necessary, however they shied away from the violent methods of the separatist Front de Liberation de Quebec (FLQ). But those same people saw that words alone might not carry enough strength to effect real change and that, though morally reprehensible, the actions of the FLQ were more likely to attract attention, to shake up the status quo. It was a time of deep division for the country and for the province of Quebec – not an easy time to sum up dramatically. To raise the issue of separatism was to invite a whole host of questions, many of which had difficult answers, some of which had no answer. A popular playwright entering into the debate would be expected, even required to offer some new insight into the conflict. Gélinas, in the form of Fridolin, had spoken with a strong voice of the people of Quebec through the 1930s and 40s – so much so that he was virtually elected by acclamation to write the first play *de chez nous*. And so it was with expectation and hope that the people turned to him

again in 1966 as he offered his views on the social and economic issues that were dividing his province.

Gélinas' primary objective in choosing the separatist situation as subject matter for his play was not political, but had more to do with addressing his changing audience. In writing *Hier les enfants dansaient,* Gélinas was trying to employ the dramatic potential of the separatist theme to appeal to a broader public. Anne-Marie Sicotte avers, "Il sent que son public s'effrite, que les thèmes qu'il affectionne ont de moins en moins de résonance. Il cherche, dans la mesure de ses moyens, à se « moderniser », avec un thème proche de l'actualité susceptible de séduire un public plus jeune . . . et plus nombreux"[27] (Sicotte 1996, 131). There is further evidence of Gratien's direct attempts to attract a younger audience in his choice of title for the play. The original working title was *La Maison divisée* (The Divided House), however when Gélinas was given a poem written in prison by a young man with a family and political situation similar to Andrés in the play, he opted to title his play after a line from the poem, "les enfants dansaient hier." Embedded in this choice of title is not only an attempt to connect with the younger generation by showcasing the work of a man imprisoned for violent separatist activities, but an echo of Pierre Gravel's own longing to see his family situation return to the blissful harmony of old. The title at once reaches out to the younger generation while simultaneously communicating a desire to return to the old ways, and becomes a telling example of the tension that exists in the play as the writer struggles to reconcile the social and political sentiments of two generations. Gélinas wanted to appeal to the youth of Quebec, however

[27] He sensed that his public support was dwindling, and that the themes he dealt with had less and less resonance. He sought, in his way, to modernize himself with a theme that reflected reality, capable of attracting a younger – and more abundant – audience.

he did not want to lose his following among the older generation. To that end, he avoids taking any sides on the issue of separatism, offering little by way of political analysis, but merely presenting it in all its frustrating complexity. This raises an important question: can a play about politics be non-political? Or, more importantly, should it be?

Years later, during an interview with the magazine *Lettres quebecoises,* Gélinas spoke of his thoughts on the political nature of theatre. The interview took place in 1985 and was conducted by Donald Smith:

> **DS** –Plusieurs commentateurs ont affirmé que Fridolin a été un éveilleur de conscience, qu'il a contribué à l'éclatement d'une famille québécoise trop renfermée sur elle-même et d'une société théocratique étouffante.
> **GG** – Vous savez, ce n'est pas à moi de le dire. Tout ce que je peux affirmer, c'est ceci : il est très difficile de faire un bon texte de théâtre. Si on essaie d'en faire en plus un sermon ou un pamphlet, on risque de rater son coup.
> ***
> **DS** – L'ampleur de la satire sociale dans les *Fridolinades* est mirobolante. Tout y passe : hommes politiques – Mackenzie King, Adélard Godbout, Camilien Houde, Médéric Martin, Sir Wilfrid Laurier – hommes religieux, écrivains réactionnaires; l'institution du mariage; l'enseignement de l'histoire; l'éducation sous la tutelle de Duplessis et de l'Église.
> **GG** – C'était à l'intérieur de la formule. On ne peut pas faire une revue d'actualités sans regarder autour de soi et sans se servir de la satire. Les situations de les personnages qu'un bon caricaturiste met en relief ne sont pas nécessairement méprisés par ce dernier, au contraire. Mais il se dit : c'est du bois pour faire rire. La caricature est la contrepartie du pouvoir un peu trop grand qui est donné à ces institutions ou à ces personnages. C'est de la contestation discrète et souriante.[28] (Smith, 52)

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[28] **DS** – Many critics feel that Fridolin awoke a consciousness, that he helped people to break free of Quebec families too closed in on themselves and a stifling theocratic society.
GG – It's not for me to say. All I can affirm is this: it is very difficult to write a good play. If we try to turn it into a sermon or a pamphlet we risk missing the mark.
***
DS – *Les Fridolinades* was abundant in social satire. Everything was presented: men of politics – Mackenzie King, Adélard Godbout, Camilien Houde, Médéric Martin, Sir Wilfrid Laurier – men of religion, revolutionary writers; the institution of marriage; the teaching of history; education under the rule of Duplessis and the Church.
GG – It's all a product of the formula. One can't present a contemporary revue without looking around oneself for things to be satirized. The situations and personalities that a good caricaturist parodies do not necessarily reflect his own convictions; on the contrary. He recognizes that it is good material for laughter. Caricaturism is the counterpart to persons and institutions with a bit too much power. It's a discrete and good-natured kind of criticism.

Gélinas' primary objective was to entertain; he did not begin write with a political or personal agenda, but instead focused on what he thought would generate the most enthusiastic response from his audience. He describes his work as that of a caricaturist, making a distinction between his work and art with a political agenda; Gélinas consistently downplayed any role he may have had in the social and cultural awakening that led to the Quiet Revolution. However in attempting to deny a political agenda, Gélinas demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of popular art, for popular art is inherently political: it is a process of holding up a mirror to the people and describing for them what they see and who they are, a practice that Gélinas is fully aware of when he refers to the "bois pour faire rire" that is the mainstay of the caricaturist. In attempting to distance himself from the political arena Gélinas reveals his own misunderstanding of the relationship between art and politics; or, perhaps, it was not misunderstanding so much as the intense desire of a man to see his nation united, to the point of deceiving himself when faced with their division.

Examined from a current day perspective we can appreciate the play for capably presenting the universal theme of generational conflict, however at the time of the play's performance it was greeted with strong praise or damnation based not on its quality as a piece of drama so much as its handling of the separatist and federalist arguments. Some felt that Gélinas did not go far enough in support of the separatist cause; others felt that the play was a breakthrough in how it presented with humour and tragedy the situation that was tearing the country apart. Of the former opinion the majority were French-Canadian; Jean Basile of *Le Devoir* accused Gélinas of "opportunism in his choice of

subject matter, and, worse, of having created typically bourgeois, rather than revolutionary, theatre" (Usmiani, 72). English-Canadian audiences, however, reacted more favourably to the play. The English version of the play, *Yesterday the Children were Dancing*, premiered in Prince Edward Island July 5, 1967, where it went on as part of the Centennial Celebrations at the Charlottetown Festival. Nathan Cohen of the *Toronto Daily Star* raved, "At last, . . . a play that deals directly and forthrightly with the central fact of the Canadian conscience . . . a play which disturbs, unsettles and amuses, and vaults to an extraordinary level of political insight" (qtd. in Usmiani, 73). With the objective of playing to the audience – rather than of tackling the political debate surrounding separatism – Gélinas sets himself something of a contradictory challenge, for to be popular is to be political. This contradiction results in a play that is uncertain if it wants to be a piece of drama or a political statement – an uncertainty that weakens it as either.

Hier les enfants dansaient is fraught with contradictory characters. It uses theatrical conventions of opposites in an often-confusing attempt to express the duality and complexity of Quebec's political situation. Gélinas made repeated claims that he was simply attempting to reflect the times, and that his interest was not political so much as the everyday life of Quebeckers. The dramatist in Gélinas saw an opportunity in the separatist movement to re-connect with a younger audience in much the same way as he had done during WWII with the *Fridolinons*. He sought to use his charm and humour to help people recognize, laugh at, and understand a difficult situation. He was also counting on his fame and his endearing identity as the 'everyman' of Quebec to carry

some weight and offer a calming effect, which was something Gélinas personally felt the separatist issue desperately needed. However, in calling for calm he falls on the federalist side of the argument, albeit unintentionally. At the very centre of the separatist strategy was to convince the people of Quebec that they had been calm and non-violent in trying to achieve change for too long, and that a more aggressive approach was required. This is not an indictment of Gélinas – who no doubt went about writing the play with only the best of intentions – so much as a testament to the naiveté of a playwright who continued to deny political affiliation in a province that had become polarized by and obsessed with politics.

As with *Tit-Coq, Hier* explores the institution of family and examines the power it holds in Quebec. In this case family is presented as an ideal standard – a standard that can be used to leverage a situation. From the moment he announces his involvement in the bombings, André is shamed into renouncing his plans by virtue of the effect it will have on the family. The immediate response from Gravel is, "You can't do this to me!" followed by O'Brien's assertion, "you're not going to ruin your father's career for a senseless thing like that?" (Gélinas 1969, 40). Gravel can't mention the two years in prison that André will likely receive for his crime without immediately following it up with a reminder of "the anxiety, the harm, and the shame" he'll bring upon his family (Gélinas 1969, 50). When Louise arrives on the scene she asks, "what did we do to hurt you, André?" (Gélinas 1969, 55), and Gravel immediately accuses his son of taking revenge on the family: "What can we possibly have done to this boy, for him to take revenge by loading us with a cross like this?" Preserving the sanctity of the family

becomes the primary argument for Gravel, O'Brien, and Louise as they try to dissuade André from his course of action.

Gravel only counters his son on political grounds once: "What is this masochism that makes you plunge headlong into violence, when our democratic system allows anyone to foster the wildest political theory absolutely legally? . . . If your Separatist ideas are so terrific, if they're the magic cure for all that ails us, lay them honestly before the voters. Who's stopping you? If the people go along with you, then we'll have to face up to them" (Gélinas 1969, 50). This is the only actual political argument that Gravel offers; André responds by calling his father's political beliefs a "game of democracy," in which the ruling class holds "all the trumps." Upon hearing this retort, Gravel abandons this line of argument in defeat, calling André a "Niagara of prejudice." Actual political discussion dissolves quickly into bickering; Gravel and son demonstrate little more argumentative acumen than a pair of schoolboys. Perhaps this is an accurate reflection of the political atmosphere in Quebec at the time, which left little room for cool, distanced debate.

Gélinas would no doubt explain his reluctance to enter into political analysis as intentional, a product of resisting the potential to turn the play into a 'sermon' or 'pamphlet', however one wonders why Gélinas would attempt to keep his distance from politics in a play that deals directly with a conflict of political ideals. According to Sicotte, Gélinas' intent for *Hier* was to demonstrate, "qu'il existe au Québec un gouffre qui menace de séparer de plus en plus la génération en place et celle qui suivra. Traduire

la peine profonde et la rage impuissante de la génération en place qui est sûre d'avoir raison; l'intransigeance, l'obstination de la jeune generation, pas du toute impressionnée par l'enjeu qu'elle devrait payer pour se réaliser"[29] (Sicotte 1996, 130). We can speculate as to whether this was Gélinas' only objective, or merely the one he chose to present to his critical audience, however it begs the question: why would Gélinas choose to demonstrate the generational conflict between father and son with so volatile an issue as the separatist movement? Would it not have been possible to find a scenario to explore this universal theme where politics did not play such a substantial role? Gélinas wanted to avoid turning his play into a polemic, but this was simply a product of wanting to appeal to as many people as possible. Canadian political drama was still in its infancy, and Gélinas was struggling to bring two warring factions together using the same tactic he'd used as a child trying to reconcile his parents. His call for calm became something of a complex – and at times contradictory – attempt to summarize and defuse the issue of separatism.

Hier is fraught with contradictions, inconsistencies which suggest Gélinas was aware of the potential for his play to turn into a political pamphlet, and that he was actively trying to preclude any classification of it as such. Pierre Gravel holds up the sanctity of the family as the fundamental institution to be respected, shaming André for the difficulties his actions will bring to the domestic unit. Gravel feels so strongly about honouring his family that he insists on consulting them before accepting a powerful cabinet position; he

[29] "There exists in Quebec a gulf that threatens to separate more and more the current generation and the one that will follow. On one side there is the current generation, with its profound pain and impotent rage, convinced of its correctness; on the other there is the intransigence and obstinacy of the youth, having no idea of what is at stake.

goes so far as to tell the Prime Minister himself, who calls in order to press Gravel's acceptance of the cabinet position, that, "as a matter of principle, I want to get a seal of approval from my wife . . . I am liberal minded not only in politics but also within the family" (Gélinas 1969, 38). Gravel connects his family to his politics; good behaviour in one arena is identical to good behaviour in the other, and the play takes on an almost allegorical quality. Gravel must receive the approval of his family before accepting office just as he insists André must win the support of the voters in realising his political ideals. Bombing is an act of violence not only against the thing destroyed, but against the very institution of family and the political apparatus of democracy. The logic follows that Gravel is for democracy, Gravel is for the Liberals, Gravel is for the family, thus Liberal democracy is for the family. This equation is put forward as a counterpoint to André's passionate, righteous, and violent commitment to his politics. Family, however, is also a consideration for André, though his sense of family encompasses only Quebec. Pierre sees Quebec as part of a larger family called Canada, and the two men clash over these contrasting definitions, literally dividing their own family in the process of defending their political idea of it.

However the equation of Liberal politics with family values is complicated when we consider the character of Roberge. Roberge is a blustery politico, aggressive in asserting opinions that are seldom in agreement with each other. He declares at one point, "If every man who could stand up to [the separatists] stays in his warm bed making love to his wife, what the hell's going to happen to the country?" (Gélinas 1969, 11). Roberge displays contempt for domesticity, setting it up in opposition to the kind of energy

necessary to meet the nation's political needs. However when Nicole drops by looking for André, Roberge croons, "Oh to be in love instead of politics – especially on a Saturday night!" (Gélinas 1969, 13). While love – especially not the teenage, Saturday night variety Roberge refers to – is certainly not equal to family values, this remains a contrasting and somewhat contradictory thing for a man to utter who only two pages previously seemed contemptuous of anyone who would choose making love over political activity. Roberge demonstrates outright misogyny when Gravel introduces his secretary: "You know my secretary, Miss Martin?" to which Roberge responds, "And I hope to know her better!" (Gélinas 1969, 16). Given Gravel's equation of family values with Liberal politics, the fact that Roberge is the furthest thing from a family man becomes a subtle indictment of the Liberal party. Roberge emerges a "yes-man," willing to say anything to further his advantage in any particular situation.

Increasingly troubling statements continue to pour out of Roberge, which serves to paint the Liberal party he represents in an increasingly unfavourable light. In an attempt to bolster Gravel's ego and spur him on to accept the Cabinet position, Roberge announces, "today we're killing the fatted calf in your honour . . . we'd've gladly slit its throat ages ago if you'd agreed to be our candidate in '57" (Gélinas 1969, 14). This is a particularly morbid image; in particular, the reference to animal sacrifice suggests ancient religious practices – precisely the sort of thing that the Catholic Church would have condemned as heathen and sinful. This casts something of a macabre light on Roberge, and suggests a division between his Liberal ideology and Catholicism. As has been previously discussed, the Catholic Church had come under scrutiny in Quebec as advocates of

separatism condemned it as a collaborator of the federal government. The Catholic Church as an institution, however, must be considered as separate from the Catholic faith, which continues to be a source of strength and identity for many Quebecois. Roberge demonstrates a troubling conflation of morbidity and faith: "You know as well as I do [the Minister of Justice is] done for. Have a little faith in your stars!" (Gélinas 1969, 14); he enters into the territory of heresy when he advises, "don't waste your time crying to little Jesus. Call on me" (Gélinas 1969, 18). Embedded in this advice is an ultimatum; Roberge literally positions himself – and by extension the Liberal Party – in opposition to religion, and becomes something of a seductive, secular enticement away from one of the foundations of French-Canadian society. Roberge not only scorns religion, but is disturbingly cavalier about human life: "We'll get you onto that second plane if we have to kill someone else" (Gélinas 1969, 18). Images of death abound; Roberge's almost frantic excitement is directly attached to another man's impending death. Vis-à-vis Roberge, the Liberal party is presented as an institution that capitalizes on death, and considers the pleasures of sex and love as secondary to those of political power.

Gravel is fully aware of Roberge's character flaws, at one point commenting quietly to O'Brien "The gall of the man!" (14). Roberge only leaves after being pushed out the door, after which Gravel declares, "Now I will have a drink! I need it!" (23). Gélinas deliberately wrote Roberge as a man of questionable character in order to morally isolate Gravel in the play, which is necessary if he is to appeal to both sides of Quebec politics. Gravel is not a supporter of the separatists, however it is essential that he be unimpressed and un-phased by the machinery of federal politics. He must seem to understand full well

the back-stabbing, manipulative, and morally questionable world he will enter into if he decides to take the job in Ottawa; his desire to get involved nonetheless becomes a comment on the purity of his character. Gravel is intended to be a shining beacon of morality amidst a morass of corruption, making him just the man to effect real and meaningful change for the people of Quebec.

The character of Pierre Gravel is himself something of a contradictory character. He agrees with parts of Quebec's nationalist agenda, however his analysis of the situation is vague. He claims that separatism is a "catastrophe which would plunge the province into everlasting misery" (Gélinas 1969, 20), however feels "that doesn't mean French-Canada should let itself be steamrollered by the Establishment like so much asphalt" (Gélinas 1969, 21). Gravel is trying to stay in the middle of the political spectrum, with allegiances to neither the federalist nor the separatist agenda. We are to believe that Gravel's only desire is for a peaceful resolution, that he is a father figure who wants nothing so much as for his household to be harmonious. However this is a difficult belief to hold when we consider that, in the eyes of the separatists, this very tactic – the call for peaceful acceptance and the commitment to slow change – was the same tactic that the federal government had been using for generations to pacify and oppress French-Canadians. When Gravel speaks of his desire to run for office he admits: "To tell the whole truth, I'm dying to! I was noncommittal in front of Roberge to see if they were really interested in having me. But I'm dying to!" (Gélinas 1969, 24). Gravel describes his enthusiasm to enter federal politics with an image of death, echoing Roberge's rhetoric. He repeatedly accuses André of being "mixed-up" (Gélinas 1969, 26). He calls

the bombings a "musical-comedy plot" (Gélinas 1969, 50), and describes the whole separatist movement as the product of "a mixed-up bunch of spoiled brats" (Gélinas 1969, 59). Gravel implies that immaturity is the root of the separatist movement, yet through the play it is consistently Gravel who resorts to name-calling, provocation, and passive-aggression (the repeated attempts to use shame and guilt to get André to recant) in order to win the argument.

André, for his part, is a calm, level-headed, well-spoken young man of admirably firm convictions. Gélinas paints André in as favourable a light as possible, while Gravel is a jumble of contradictions, prone to bursts of immaturity. Gélinas deliberately makes André a more attractive character in an attempt to appeal to a younger audience. He knew that his core audience was of the older generation, and more likely to fall in line with federalist ideology; he was aware that this would work against him in any effort to write a play that would appeal to both sides of the political argument over separatism. In order to contrast federalist sentiment, Gélinas arms André with the lion's share of intellect, poise, maturity, and charm. Gravel yells, stamps his feet, and accuses André of deliberately trying to hurt him in the most childish and self-indulgent fashion. What we are presented with is an emotional argument used to win an intellectual debate. At the end of the play we are left liking André and wanting desperately to understand why he has resorted to violence. We are frustrated with Gravel and wish he would stop yelling, though we sympathise with him as he beats his head against the immovable object that is his son. Ultimately we understand little more about the issue of separatism than the fact

that these two men have been unable to arrive at any conclusion over it, for neither of them have been willing to compromise and see through the eyes of the other.

Gélinas deserves credit for dealing openly and directly with Quebec's volatile political situation in the 1960s, which was something very few of the mainstream playwrights in Canada were doing at the time. *Hier* presents a warning to the audience: separatism threatens to pull our family apart. However this warning was already well-known to the people of Quebec – it was a warning they had been hearing for generations in the mouths of politicians, clergymen, and employers: don't cause trouble, for doing so will upset the harmony of society. When Gélinas entered into the argument he did so bearing the pride of his people, empowered to speak with their voice. Some felt he owed them more than a complex, impassioned, verbose rehashing of the arguments they'd been listening to for decades.

In his article "Gélinas's Propaganda for Reformism and Terrorism in Quebec" J. Wilson Clark calls Gélinas "a 'sham' nationalist with a deep desire to undermine and weaken the anti-imperialist front and to protect the interests of Quebec's exploiters and oppressors" (Clark, 44). Clark contends that imperial powers use propaganda to convince anti-imperialists that there are only two methods to effect change – reformism and terrorism – and that those two methods are mutually exclusive. Clark describes how terrorists and reformists are trained to view each other as opponents, the former disgusted by inactivity, the latter appalled by violence. This effectively obscures the fact that, while their means differ, their ends are the same; the tactic is to divide-and-conquer, distracting the anti-

imperialists while the empire tightens its grip.[30] Perhaps this explains why the younger, more politically savvy generation – those to whom Gélinas was trying to appeal – were troubled by the play, as well as the sharply contrasting Anglophone sentiment, which, "hailed the play as a breakthrough in communication between the French and English communities of Canada, a feat of artistic consciousness-raising unequalled in the history of Canadian theatre" (Usmiani, 73). It is clear that, while Gélinas may have been moving toward that ideal of a National and Popular Theatre which he set for himself upon receiving his honorary doctorate, he was to find himself further and further away from the popular roots of French-Canadian culture upon which his success was built.

Hier les enfants dansaient is a plea for moderation and calm in a place that no doubt resembled less and less the place where Gélinas grew up. The dialogue is intense and complex, but the play offers virtually nothing by way of a concrete analysis of the situation that faced Quebec. Further, characters are inconsistent within themselves and, especially in the case of the younger generation, represent an attempt by a playwright who is used to working with stock characters to bend those characters into complex, real, politically activated Quebecois. Gélinas' portrayal of the younger characters is all-important, for it was the younger generation who led the Quiet Revolution, and it was

[30] Léandre Bergeron provides a good example of this technique in his book *The History of Quebec; a Patriote's Handbook* (Toronto: New Canada Publications, 1971). Joseph Guibord, a printer and member of the *Institut Canadian de Montréal*, died in 1875. The *Institut* was frowned on by the Catholic Church, so much so that they refused to give Guibord his last rites or to bury him in the consecrated part of the Catholic cemetery. What ensued was a lengthy and almost comic series of burials, exhumations, and stand-offs. Bergeron observes, "This conflict was a good indication of how much French-Canadian society had regressed in such a short time after the big economic and political conflict of the Rebellion. The colonized, who were now defeated and set aside from the mainstream of history, went backwards a few centuries and found themselves pouring all their energy into medieval quarrels. The colonizer no doubt found it amusing to see the colonized cursing each other while lugging around a corpse from one cemetery to another. The colonized people were caught up in sterile wrangling. The colonizer's tactic of divide and rule had worked: now he just had to watch the show" (p. 125).

their interest he sought to capture. By wandering almost accidentally into the federalist argument – that eternal plea for calm while inequalities persisted – he did little more than cement the differences that existed between them and the older generation.

It is, however, difficult to see Gélinas as an enemy of Quebeckers in any description. His career is characterized by an overwhelming desire to please, a trait that carried through from his childhood where he desperately tried to reconcile his feuding parents. Understood in this context, *Hier* becomes a plea from that same child, desperate to save his parents' marriage. However the problem was that Gélinas was no longer a child; he was the father of Quebec dramaturgy. As such, the public looked to him for direction of a parental nature. That direction came in the form of a young child pleading for peace in a conflict, however in doing so he demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of the conflict he was trying to resolve. Interestingly, Gélinas appears to be fully aware of this fact, and perhaps even aware of the fact that he, as a member of the older generation, could never truly understand the motives of the young. Toward the end of the play Nicole, André's girlfriend, cries "You don't even speak the same language!" (Gélinas 1969, 69). She hits the nail on the head, but more importantly she defines what ends up being a structural weakness of the play: Pierre Gravel does not really understand his son André, just as Gélinas does not really understand the separatist movement. André offers a definition of his father that holds true for the playwright as well:

> It's not your fault, but you grew up in a colonial world, where submission to the English and licking their boots were taught to you as national virtues. Your most inspiring motto? "Endure to endure!" You sat blissfully on your rear ends at the side of the road, watching the English parade by, minting money and swelling with power, and you smiled approval like dear little friars under a vow of eternal poverty . . . Know

> what you've got? The complex of a dog on the leash, who'll never go farther than his lousy doghouse, even if the leash is removed and he's whipped. How can you lead us to freedom? (Gélinas 1969, 60-61)

No doubt Gélinas was aware of precisely the weakness of which André accuses his father. Gélinas made a name for himself by pleasing everyone, English and French, and showing them that, while they might have their differences, they still shared many things, including a sense of humour, and a sense of pride in what it meant to be Canadian, as complex a thing as that may occasionally have been. But, as Pierre Gravel points out to André after his defamatory comments, "today all that's being changed!" In the 20 years between *Tit-Coq* and *Hier les enfants dansaient* Quebec had undergone a veritable transformation, a transformation in which Gélinas and his theatre played an important role. People saw themselves and it was endearing, even funny, but on another level it was sad. They left the theatre happy, but also silently resolved to no longer fit into the stereotype so neatly defined by the young Gélinas. In much the same way as *Tit-Coq*, *Hier les enfants dansaient* must be understood in the context of the time in which it was written and performed. The separatist movement was becoming increasingly radical, and many Quebeckers were trying to find a balance between ideology and action. Gratien later ruminated on why the play fared better in English Canada than in his native Quebec, and suggested that it may have had something to do with English Canada thinking this play was about "what Quebec wanted" (Smith, 54), which was a popular question of the time for English Canada as they watched the cultural revolution taking place in Quebec. Where the Quebec audience saw only a rehashing of the same tired arguments on stage as were being played out in the parliament buildings, without a significant suggestion as to

where the solution lay, the English Canadian audience felt that this play provided them with insight into the puzzling social and political riddle that was Quebec.

Perhaps it was impossible to shed any light on a political situation that was still very much in foment. Perhaps it was naïve of Gélinas to think that he could appeal to both young and old, to somehow sum up the entire political conflict as simply a battle of wills between generations, or hope to quell the conflict without entering into partisan politics. Considering he was one of the first Canadian mainstream dramatists to tackle the issue of separatism, it is not surprising that he encountered a dramaturgical conundrum: he had no frame of reference to turn to when navigating the complex dialectic of politics and art. He had helped Quebec become a politically self-aware nation, then watched as it continued to change beyond his ability to comprehend. Where once he was able to win the hearts of young and old, he now struggled to understand and communicate with the younger generation. In his attempt to sum up the generation gap, he unwittingly provides an example of it. Perhaps this was Gélinas greatest gift to his province: in his earnest, almost child-like attempt to calm the boiling tempers of his countrymen he demonstrated how that nation had matured to a point where child-like solutions no longer sufficed. It was one of Gratien's most fervent desires that Quebec recognize its own greatness. In helping it to do so, he played the role of any good parent, then had the wisdom to step back once he had seen it grow beyond his own ability to nurture. Gratien would write only one more stage play (*La passion de Narcisse Mondoux*, 1986), and instead devoted much of the rest of his career to developing the talents of young artists. Perhaps he took to heart his own words, spoken by the character of André, and saw his own inability to

capture the spirit of the 1960s as he had in the 30s and 40s. It is a testament to his wisdom that he recognized this shortcoming, and that he chose to put his efforts into equipping the next generation to do what he could not.

Conclusion

Gratien spent his career seeking out what he'd missed as a child: the warmth, affection, and acceptance of an adoring family. When he performed he spoke to the audience as a brother might address his family at a reunion. His theatre drew from shared cultural experiences and personae, and was presented in a language that was unmistakably French-Canadian. Gélinas' work is best understood in the broader context of what it led to for theatre in Quebec; his extraordinary successes were not only a measure of his abilities as a playwright and performer, but also of Quebec's hunger for a local playwright, perhaps even a collective subconscious urge to see their own stories told on stage. Gélinas cultivated a familial relationship with his audiences. A sense of family and community pervades the French-Canadian identity, no doubt a result of the shared experience of being a cultural minority in a largely English-speaking country. Gélinas' ability to draw in the audience came from his comprehensive understanding of the family, the community, the church, and the government of Quebec, and his ability to present those things in a recognizable and insightful fashion. His interests were primarily to entertain the audience, and generating a sense of communal understanding was integral to his success in that regard.

Gélinas paved the way for artists of the next generation. He opened the Comédie Canadienne in 1958, a theatre devoted to the development of new talent that would give birth to a whole new generation of Quebec artists. He was president of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (currently known as Telefilm Canada) from 1969 to

1978. He translated, adapted, and directed a French-language version of George Ryga's 1967 play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* at the Comédie Canadienne, as well as translating and adapting the musical *Hair* by Gerome Ragni and James Rado, in 1970. Clearly he could not bring his countrymen to all the theatre of the world, however he could bring all the theatre of the world to his countrymen. He was a consultant during the early days of Montreal's National Theatre School, an institution that has gone on to become one of Canada's foremost theatre training centres. And not only did Gélinas support the development of theatre in his province, he literally fathered a new generation of actors: his sons Pascal and Yves performed with their father in the English production of *Yesterday the Children Were Dancing*, and his son Alain and granddaughter Mitsou have both made their living as performers. He has supported scores of other emerging theatre professionals; today a bronzed statue of Fridolin is displayed inside the Monument National, a testament to Gélinas' lasting contribution to Quebec theatre.

There is need for further research on the question of nationalism in Canadian theatre, and an examination of how English Canada will (sometimes opportunistically) claim French-Canadian theatre as its own. Culture has been an emancipator for the French-Canadian people, perhaps the only thing that has been incontrovertibly theirs in a province where they have historically had little access to, or control over, their own financial resources. If culture and tradition represent sources of strength for a people resisting English cultural domination, the adoption of French culture by the English represents a hegemonic absorption of something intended to be a demonstration of uniqueness. Questions abound surrounding Gélinas' politics, whether he was a French nationalist, a

Canadian federalist, or somewhere in between. Perhaps he really was nothing more than an artist trying earnestly to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, however the political awareness in his theatre, especially evident in the later *Fridolinons* sketches, underscores a comprehensive understanding of the French situation in Canada; not only that, but within that understanding there is an implied call for change.

Over the course of my reading and research into the world of Gélinas I have developed a tremendous appreciation for his work. There were times when I became fixated on what I viewed as a shortcoming of his, more specifically on his inability to see (or unwillingness to admit to) the inherently political nature of what he was doing on stage. However I have come to recognize his work as being of very high quality, and having come at a crucial time in the development of his nation; indeed, I am convinced that Quebec's cultural awakening of the 1960s had much to do with the sentiments espoused and encouraged by Gélinas' theatre. He helped define what it meant to be Quebecois by describing on stage a series of shared characteristics, values, and experiences, presenting them in a dialect of French that was unmistakably from Quebec. Language is of particular importance in Gélinas' work, for he not only put the people of Quebec on stage (thus demonstrating how diverse, complex, and fascinating those people could be) but when he did he wrote the way the people of Quebec actually spoke, paving the way for the 'joual' of Michel Tremblay and David Fennario. Gélinas drew for Quebec a face that it recognized, and though it was not always pretty, it was real. Though initially one might be inclined to identify this face as Fridolin or Tit-Coq, I would argue that it was none other than Gélinas himself. He forged a new theatre for his nation, and while we

may be able to look back and criticize what he did or didn't do or could have done, the fact is that he did a great deal, and it was a great deal of good that he did, and even better for the fact that he had no frame of reference, no other Quebec – or Canadian – play after which to model, or against which to judge, his own. We have many such plays today, and we have people like Gratien Gélinas to thank for it.

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